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JOE LESLIE'S WIFE

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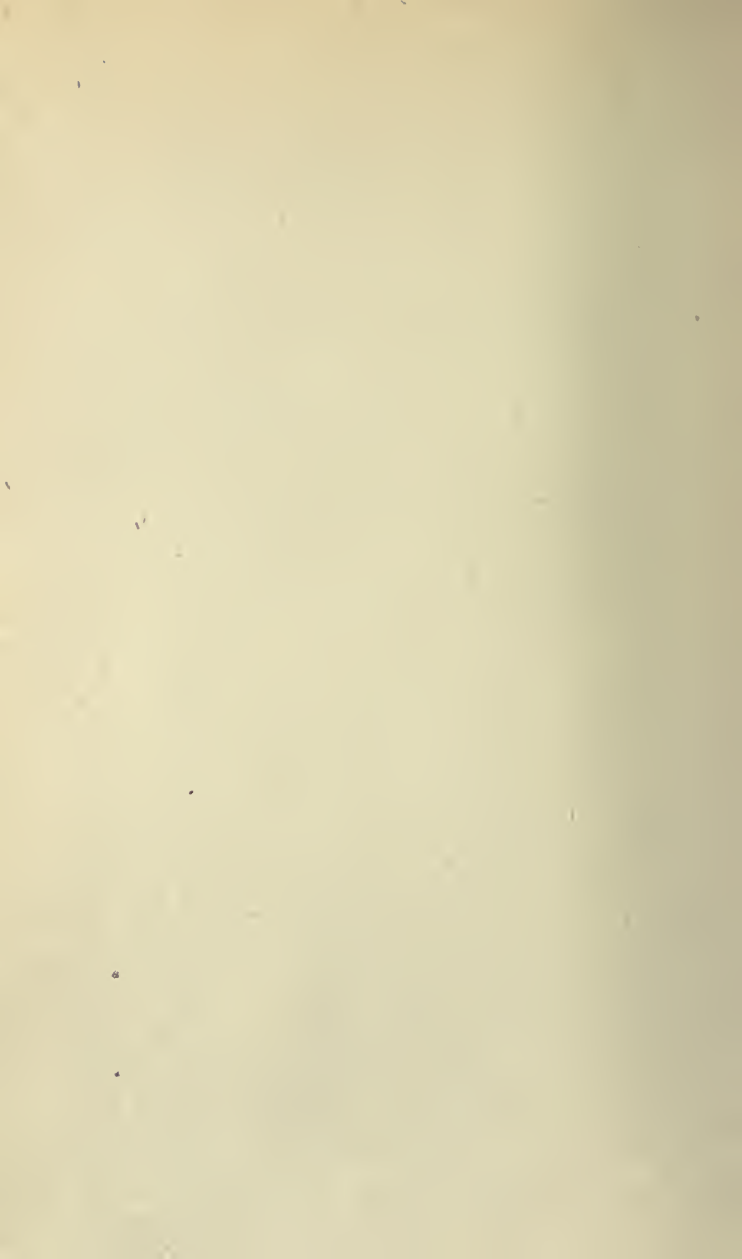
A SKELETON IN THE CLOSET

BY

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JOE LESLIE'S WIFE

OR

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CHAPTER I

THE OFFICE OF A NEW YORK DETECTIVE

The little clock in the dingy office of Eric Darrell was just pointing out the hour of four when there came a rap on the door. Within the proprietor sat alone, his feet elevated upon the top of a desk, and from his position it was evident that his thoughts were far away, for although he took an occasional whiff at his cigar, it was in an absent-minded way.

At this summons, his interest was at once aroused—his feet came down from their elevated position, and an expression appeared on his face that might have been a smile.

"A woman, by Jove!" he muttered, giving

his handkerchief a flirt over the desk where his feet had been so recently deposited.

There was no guess-work about this, neither had the detective been able to distinguish anything feminine about the knock.

Over the door was a peculiar little contrivance, which by means of several small mirrors would tell the occupant of the office who summoned him—a useful affair under the circumstances, as the detective might at some time have a visitor bent on taking his life, and under such circumstances he would be warned.

Jumping to his feet he approached the door—had it been a man he probably would have sung out: “Come in,” and been done with it.

A lady stood there.

She was deeply veiled, and yet there was that about her dress that bespoke the lady.

Darrell saw this at the first glance, and also judged from her figure that she was young.

“Is this the office of Mr. Darrell?” she asked, in low, pleasing tones.

“Yes, madam,” replied the other, respectfully.

“Is he in?”

“I am Eric Darrell, at your service. If you wish to see me on business will you come in?”

He stepped aside as he spoke.

"Thank you, I will."

As the lady entered the room, the detective closed the door, and with the pressure of his thumb secured it so that no one could enter without knocking. It was not his intention to be rudely interrupted in his interview—he had from time to time all sorts of visitors, and did not mean that one of the men he employed should come in upon them while they were engaged in talking.

The lady had already seated herself, and seemed to be looking around the room, through her veil, with considerable interest.

Perhaps it was her first visit to the office of a detective, and she was taken with the strange assortment of mementoes that hung around the room.

Eric Darrell swept his eyes about him, and something akin to a smile came over his face as he viewed his curiosity shop—there were scores and scores of murderous tools and ingenious contrivances, each of which was connected with some crime or criminal in the past history of New York, and in the pursuit of his chosen business he had been brought into connection with the affair or the individual.

The detective was a little proud of his collection, as well as the Rogue's Gallery over the desk, where some hundreds of faces were represented, many extremely brutal and some good-looking, while the pictures of women were not infrequent.

"My clerk is out this afternoon, madam—we are quite alone, so that you may speak without any fear of being overheard," he said, as he took a chair, and sat down facing his unknown client.

"I am glad of that, Mr. Darrell, for what I have to say to you must be kept a dead secret."

The detective was more than ever convinced that he had to deal with a young woman—her figure was exceedingly pleasing, and her voice a sympathetic one.

"Madam, I am daily entrusted with secrets by all manner of persons. You can rely upon it that anything you tell me in confidence will be as safe as though whispered in the ear of a father confessor. That is my business—we detectives rival the family doctors in being made the repository of secrets."

This was well put and quite reassuring, as he had intended it should be.

The lady must have confidence in him now,

"Mr. Darrell, I want your assistance in a little domestic matter. I am a young married woman—have been married a year, and my husband is a man you would call one in a thousand—a truthful, honorable gentleman, a favorite with every one he knows.

"I love him deeply, esteem his noble qualities, and believe we could be happy through life, but there is a canker sore eating my heart—Joe has a secret, a terrible secret, and the knowledge of it is making me miserable."

She seemed a little overcome, and Darrell waited; meantime he grimly thought to himself how many Joes here in this wicked city of New York kept terrible secrets from their wives—yes, and the boot was on the other leg too.

His business had brought him into contact with many such scenes.

"Pardon my feeling so badly, Mr. Darrell. These things are an old story to you, but with me it means the wrecking of my whole life, and I am weak enough to be troubled by it."

He hastened to reassure her that he fully sympathized with her feelings.

Thus encouraged she went on:

"If ever a woman had reason to trust her hus-

band I have—and yet, as I said, Joe has a secret from me, the knowledge of which is making me miserable.

“I would not have him ever suspect that I came to consult you about it, but I am determined to know the truth—I am his wife—if he is gambling in secret, connected with any secret society or going to see some other woman I am resolved to know the worst.

“It is hard for me to explain my position, Mr. Darrell—I believe in and trust my husband as much as nearly any woman could, but I know he is keeping something from me, which excites my curiosity greatly.”

This was an old story with Darrell.

He had seen other Joes before.

In his own mind he was immediately convinced that the man was guilty.

He believed Joe to be an unmitigated scoundrel to treat his young and pretty wife in this way—for the detective had already decided this question and believed the owner of this voice and figure must also be handsome.

So he began to dig for facts, a little ruthlessly perhaps, because it was business.

Your professor of anatomy does not waste

time when getting down to a certain nerve or muscle which he wishes to expose to his class—the knife is applied without stint.

So the detective asked questions in order to expose as much of the game as possible.

"You have no hint of the truth, madam?"

"None."

"Before marriage, was your husband a man of the world?"

"He was always steady and quiet. I have never heard that my Joe ever had an entangling alliance before we were married."

Even this did not reassure Darrell—he was a little skeptical with regard to such a man, being inclined to reflect that still water runs deep.

His daily business brought him in contact with so much of the evil of life that he had a rather poor opinion of mankind in general—though ready to bow before woman's goodness, even after having had experience with numerous confidence women and others, who were more difficult to manage than male criminals.

For instance, here was a case in point—a confiding, loving wife—a cruel, deceiving husband.

"I understand, madam. How long have these strange visits been going on?"

"I do not know."

"How long have you been aware of them?"

"For two weeks. By accident I discovered that Joe was in the habit of leaving his office at half-past four, and he never reaches home until an hour and a half later.

"Even this did not do more than pique me a little to think he dallied so long, when he should have hurried home to me—but three days later, again by accident, I saw him enter a house on Twenty-seventh Street.

"At first I could not believe my eyes and I felt as though I would swoon. It was just five o'clock, and he seemed in a dreadful hurry.

"What impressed me as being the strangest part of the business, was the fact that he did not ring or even knock on the door, but with a key let himself in as though he belonged there!"

Of course—Darrell's eyebrows went up, but he made no remark—he could see through a mill-stone with a hole in it.

"I don't know why I hurried home but I did so with a trembling heart. Joe came in at his usual time, and I endeavored to be myself so that he might suspect nothing.

"On the next day, however, something im-

pelled me to go to Twenty-seventh Street again.

"Opposite to this house was a French restaurant, and about ten minutes to five I entered here and ordered supper, sitting at the window and yet far enough back not to be seen.

"It lacked but one minute to five when Joe came down the street from the elevated station, walking very fast, and went in that house.

"I sat there until twenty minutes of six, when he came out again, and walked more slowly down the street.

"Mr. Darrell, I shall say nothing about my feelings—you can understand them well enough. What I want you to do is to discover who lives in that house, and why Joe Leslie spends the better part of an hour there every day."

"Who—Joe Leslie—good heavens! it can't be the Joe Leslie I know!"

The lady seemed surprised at his words, and swept her veil aside.

Then Darrell saw he had made no mistake in believing her to be pretty—she was more than that, really handsome.

"My husband is Joseph Gregory Leslie."

"Then he is the man I know—a man whom I have always believed the best of men, liked by

every one acquainted with him. It seems incredible that he should be engaged in anything of this character."

"Because you know him, will you refuse to take my case?" she faltered.

"Not at all, Mrs. Leslie—in fact, I shall do the work all the more eagerly, hoping it may all prove to be a mistake."

"I too hope so, but my heart is filled with fears. I seem to have lived years since making this discovery. At first I meant to ask my husband plainly to explain it, but something held my tongue—for my life I could not—and only as a last resort have I come to you."

"Kindly write the number of the house here—you know it, of course."

"Indeed it is burned on my brain as with letters of fire," and she obeyed him.

"Now, Mrs. Leslie, you are to leave this matter in my hands and think of it as little as you can. At home appear as natural as you may, and believe that I will serve your interests faithfully, first, last and all the time.

"Joe is a friend of mine, and yet if he is a villain—which I cannot believe—I will discover the proofs of it and hand them to you."

"Mr. Darrell, I thank you," she said, with tears in her eyes.

"There is no occasion for it, madam—this is business with me, leaving sentiment aside—I shall charge you my regular price for such work; but at the same time I honestly hope your husband will be able to prove his innocence "

"Amen!" she said, solemnly.

At this moment there came a loud rap on the door—Mrs. Leslie uttered a little scream, which was pretty well muffled by the cobweb of a handkerchief she thrust up to her mouth.

As for Eric Darrell, the detective, he glanced up at the small tell-tale mirror just inside the transom over the door—his face was screwed up into a pucker, and pressing his finger on his lips he said in a low voice:

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish! The man who knocks is your husband, Mrs. Leslie."

CHAPTER II

TWO OF A KIND

The pretty little lady came very near swooning when she heard this.

Darrell arose from his chair.

"Come with me through the inner office," he said in low tones.

She followed him, trembling like a leaf, and looking back as though she expected the door to be broken in, and an angry husband to make his appearance on the scene.

"He must have followed me—he will be so angry—oh! what shall I do—how shall I look him in the face again?" she moaned.

"He need not see you now—here is a door that lets you out into the passage around the corner, and you can descend the stairs without being discovered. As for looking him in the face again, you have no reason to shun him, my dear madam—you are innocent of wrong-doing at any rate, and if anybody is going to be

ashamed let it be him. Good-bye, madam, trust me to the utmost."

She gave him one pitiful look that haunted the old bachelor for many day, and then, allowing her veil to fall over her pretty face, passed on toward the stairs.

Meanwhile, the knock on the other door had been twice repeated—the man without was evidently growing impatient.

Mr. Darrell walked over to the door and opened it.

"What! you, Leslie, my boy? It's good for sore eyes to see your face."

They shook hands warmly.

Leslie walked in.

The detective had seen on the instant that his old-time friend was disturbed—Joe's countenance had a gloomy look, totally at variance to the cheerful expression that generally marked it.

Of course Eric Darrell wondered to what he owed this visit.

Was it brought about by the fact that Joe's wife had just been seated in the very chair he now threw his long form upon?

Since Joe's marriage he had seen very little of him—their lines ran apart and seldom crossed,

yet they had once been pretty good friends.

Again the detective closed the door and fastened it against interruption.

Whatever the cause of Leslie's visit, he meant to have a quiet chat with him.

If the husband of the pretty lady who had just quitted his office demanded to know why Lillian Leslie had visited him, he would have to confess the truth, but he knew enough to keep a close tongue until the lay of the land was made manifest.

Before sitting down himself he took up a box of cigars and offered it to Joe.

The other looked at it rather sheepishly and then declined with a wave of the hand.

"Ah! sworn off, eh? Something I never expected such an old smoker as you to do; but every man to his taste. Now, old fellow, to what am I indebted for this visit—a desire to talk over old times, or business?"

Leslie seemed to swallow a lump in his throat, and playing nervously with the paper-cutter on the desk—which was a dagger taken from a notorious assassin whom Darrell had assisted to the gallows years before, said huskily:

"Eric, you are the only man in the world I

would come to with domestic troubles. What I am about to confide in you now I do as to a friend. At the same time I ask for your assistance in a professional way."

Then he seemed lost in deep thought for a minute, and was no doubt collecting his energies to speak to the point.

As for Eric Darrell, he surveyed the other in deepest surprise.

What was coming?

Was Joe Leslie deep in the mire, and had he come to have his old friend extricate him?

One thing seemed certain—he did not appear to know that his pretty wife had been in this very room less than five minutes before.

Believing this, the detective considered it a peculiar freak of fate that these two should visit him on the same day and almost the same hour, each without the knowledge of the other.

At length Joe had recruited his energies to equal the occasion.

He looked up.

The detective was leaning back in his chair and calmly observing him, wreaths of blue white smoke curling up from his Havana.

"Eric, you never met my wife?" he said.

The other did not by any start betray himself.

"That is your fault, old man. You were married in Chicago, and after settling down here you never invited us old bachelors to visit you," he replied, quietly.

"Forgive me. But see, here is her photograph. Take a look at the girl who captured the man who used to laugh at all Benedicts."

Darrell took the picture.

It was the same face he had so recently sat *vis-a-vis* with in this very office, with one particular difference—the photograph was of a happy, loving girl, while the other had been the face of an anxious woman.

Mentally he noted this fact, while looking long and earnestly at the photograph.

"Well, what do you think of her?" asked Leslie.

He was a tall man, perhaps thirty-five years of age, not handsome, but with a face that won him friends everywhere, for Joe Leslie had a warm heart and was ready to champion the cause of any poor devil in distress.

"She's handsome, Joe—a beauty."

"Anyone can see that—look deeper, man."

"I can see qualities there such as might make

her a wife to be proud of, and whom any man might well hesitate to offend."

At this Joe groaned.

The shrewd detective thought he had driven one nail home—that his allusion must have hit Leslie in a tender spot—but for once he made a mistake.

Just then he was not thinking of his own shortcomings—that groan was the result of mental agony brought about by something else.

"Eric, I am in trouble," he said.

The other knew it before he spoke.

To himself he was saying:

"Now, here's a surprising thing—I am already retained by the wife, and the husband has come to confess his sins. Shall I listen—he must not bind me to a promise not to tell."

Aloud, he said:

"I'm sorry for that, Joe. Tell me all about it and heaven knows I will aid you all I can."

"Thank you, old friend—I knew it before you spoke—that was why I finally determined to come here and unbosom myself."

"It's coming," muttered Darrell, smiling grimly.

He fully expected to learn the secret of that

mysterious house on Twenty-seventh Street.

"To think," said Joe, looking around him at the walls and ceiling, "that here in this den where I spent so many careless, happy bachelor hours with you, I should now be detailing the tribulations of married life."

"Singular—of course," nodded Eric, apparently observing the ashes on the end of his cigar, but all the while watching Joe's face.

"For of course," Joe continued, "what I have to say to you concerns—my wife."

"Yes."

The detective was wondering how Joe meant to bring out his confession.

He did not dream of anything else.

"You have seen that face, Eric"—tapping the photograph—"would you say there was any deceit there?"

This was something of a staggerer—the other had not expected the electric fluid to strike in such a quarter at all.

"Deceit—in that little woman—well, I'm an old bachelor, Joe, but my judgment is generally conceded sound, and I tell you your wife is a woman of a thousand. Her face speaks of purity and charity—one could not look into the

depths of those eyes and not read truth there."

"Good heavens, man! you describe Lillian as I have believed her—one would think you had met her," cried Leslie, starting out of his moody fit.

"A good photograph can be easily read nowadays, my boy," replied Darrell, quietly; at the same time conscious that he had made a break that had better not be repeated.

Joe gave a great sigh, and resumed his despondent attitude, nervously playing with the paper-cutter.

"Eric, perhaps there are men who love their wives better than I do mine, but I am completely wrapped up in Lillian, and if I lost her I'd go to the dogs devilish quick

"You know my nature—I'm not a suspicious fool, nor am I constitutionally jealous, but I suppose I have a certain amount of the latter in my disposition—every man but an idiot has."

"That's so. Remember Othello's declaration about keeping a corner in the object of his love for other people's uses. I reckon that's the first corner we have any record of."

Joe's face had flushed at the reference made by his companion.

Quietly he went on:

"As heaven is my judge I do not wish to harbor any unjust suspicion toward my wife—I would shield her with my life from the folly of her imprudence, if such it prove to be—but I am a man, and I cannot shut my eyes to certain facts set before me. I have done everything in my power to explain the matter to myself, offering all sorts of excuses for her, but it is useless, and I feel now that I must know the truth or go crazy."

"My dear fellow, this is indeed serious."

"Serious, Eric—may you never know the awful feeling that has pressed upon my heart during the last few weeks."

"Has it been that long?"

"Yes, for two weeks I have noticed a difference in Lillian—she has hardly looked me in the face at all. Poor child, she is not accustomed to deceit, and a secret weighs upon her."

Darrell came near laughing, as he believed he had the key to the puzzle. Unaccustomed to deceit, forsooth—when it was his own mysterious actions that had disturbed Lillian.

"Two weeks, you say, Joe?"

"Well, I knew something about it before

then. Accident revealed it to me. I will tell you all, and you can judge for yourself.

"You know we live in a comfortable little house up on Eighty-sixth Street. I generally spend my days down-town at business, but I had a call up-town one morning, and my cabman drove me past my own house—I took a cab because the party I wished to see lived at a point inconvenient to the elevated, and besides I had a bushel of papers, more or less, to take him.

"While passing my house I naturally looked in.

"At that moment Lillian was opening the door and a fine-looking man entered whom she seemed to greet cordially. I wondered who he was, but forgot all about him until I came home in the evening. Somehow his face came up again before me—I waited to see if she would speak, and even made an opportunity for her to tell me of her visitor—she said nothing and I thought looked a trifle confused.

"Eric, believe me, I dropped the matter then and there—who could look into those eyes—well-springs of truth as you have just observed—and believe deceit rested there?

"The next day I again found it necessary to use the cab in going to the house of my client, and, as I passed my own dwelling, I was somewhat nettled to see the same military-looking gentleman ascending the steps.

"I looked at the time—it was ten exactly, the same hour as on the preceding day.

"Again, that evening, I gave Lillian the opportunity to tell me of her visitor, but she made no mention of it.

"Eric, the demon of jealousy had his birth in my heart in that bitter hour—my wife had a secret from me—she was receiving clandestinely a gentleman whom I did not even know.

"I battled with the fever, heaven knows how terribly, but it conquered me, and although I despised myself for doing so despicable an act I set about watching Lillian."

The large man buried his face in his hands and groaned aloud in his suffering.

CHAPTER III

THE TELL-TALE SCRAP OF PAPER

Darrell had by this time come to the conclusion that he was entering upon one of the oddest cases in his experience.

He had his sympathies aroused also, and while he generally worked for conviction, in this instance it would be otherwise, his desire being to prove the parties innocent.

Presently Leslie went on:

"I pretended to go to my office, but, instead, hovered in the neighborhood, sometimes in the drug-store on the corner.

"Thus I have discovered that regularly every morning at ten o'clock, Saturday omitted, this fine-looking foreign gentleman enters my house, and the door closes behind him.

"At eleven he appears again—it is always my wife who lets him in and sees him to the door.

"Eric, this thing is killing me—sooner than believe Lillian could be false to me I would dis-

credit my own mother; and yet here is something very, very strange—something that must be explained before my peace of mind comes back to me again. In a few words, I want you to find out who this man is, and why he calls to see my wife invariably at ten o'clock when I am supposed to be down-town money-making, and why she has never breathed one syllable of all this to me."

"I will do it, Joe, for old friendship's sake, and I most heartily pray it may turn out all right."

"Oh! I haven't any doubt of that. My dear fellow, don't imagine for an instant that I suspect my wife of anything wrong, but—well, you see—hang it, Eric, I must know the truth, and if my thoughts have wronged Lillian I shall go down on my knees before the little woman."

On his part, Mr. Darrell had, while Joe was speaking, conceived a sudden idea that would possibly explain the matter.

He did not mention it, because the explanation hinged upon his other client's case, but he kept it in mind all the same.

It was to this effect:

Perhaps Lillian had sought the advice of some

other detective before coming to him, and it was this party calling at a certain hour every day to deliver his report, whom Joe had seen.

Possibly little or no progress had been made, and hence she had finally determined to change, just as a patient, becoming dissatisfied with his doctor, calls in another physician.

Luck alone had brought her to his office—perhaps it was the sweet little cherub that watches over the affairs of lovers.

At any rate it was a piece of good fortune for all parties concerned.

He proceeded to question Joe, desiring to learn all he could of the case.

“You say you had never seen the gentleman before?”

“Never.”

“Not in your wife’s album?”

“You mean that he might be one of her old beaux—no, not even there. He is a stranger to me.”

“But if you met him you would know him?”

“Well, rather.”

“Can you describe him to me?”

“I can do better—show you a picture of him just as he leaves my front door.” With that he

held out a card, upon which was a round photograph, or rather picture, which Eric saw had been taken with a Kodak camera, just coming into general use at that time.

The scene was a door-step with a number over the door—a man was descending—the lower part of his body could not be seen, but his body and head were well taken. He carried something under his arm like a flat book.

Eric Darrell studied the face as well as he could upon such a small surface—he wanted to know it again.

Then he looked further.

Just above, a lady stood outside the door, as if seeing the gentleman depart. It was Lillian Leslie without a doubt.

“How in the deuce did you get this?” he asked in some surprise, “it’s as clever a piece of business as I know of.”

“I hired a young fellow to do it for me. He took this man several times afterward. See, there is one that shows his face better, because there is little else—it was taken close.”

Darrell examined this picture also.

“Seems to me I’ve seen this man on the street or somewhere—I can’t just place him though,” he muttered.

"Is there anything more you wish to tell me, Joe," he asked aloud.

"Unfortunately—yes."

"Proceed."

"It seemed as though fate had been pleased to conspire against my peace of mind. I picked up a piece of paper from the floor to toss into the grate in the library when certain words caught my eye, and instead I put it in my pocket."

"When was this?"

"Last evening."

"Have you the paper still?"

"Yes."

"Let me see it, if you have no objection."

"Certainly not. I want everything to be placed before you now."

"Everything but your own secret," thought the detective, as he took the paper.

It was evidently a portion of a torn note and had been twisted around.

Darrell smoothed it flat and then read in a woman's fine chirography:

"—we will hope for the best. At any rate, fair Lillian, your secret shall never be betrayed by your sincere friend,

BARBARA.

"P. S. Be sure and burn this.

B."

"What do you think of that?" asked Joe.

"It has a peculiar look. One thing is certain—Lillian made a mistake—she did not burn it up."

"But tore it to pieces instead."

"You found it in your library?"

"Yes."

"Is there a waste paper basket there?"

"Yes, but we throw papers in the grate and when they accumulate touch a match to them."

"Perhaps you might find the balance of this letter."

"In the grate?"

"Yes."

"That would be impossible."

"Why so?"

"Unfortunately, one of the first things I did upon arriving home yesterday evening was to apply a match to the papers in the grate, and they have all been consumed."

Eric shrugged his shoulders.

"That's hard luck, I take it, but men of my line never cry over spilt milk. What's the use? Now, regarding this scrap—it is signed Barbara. Have you any idea who the author is?"

"Yes, certainly—a young married lady who

lives back of us. I have always entertained much respect for Mrs. Goodwin, and am surprised to think she would enter into a conspiracy with Lillian to deceive me."

The detective hardly knew what to think.

Here was a man whom he had known and considered a first-rate fellow in the past, grieving over the fact that his wife was keeping something from him, when, all the time, he was nursing a secret within his guilty heart.

What was Darrell to make of it?

Those who live in glass houses should be careful how they throw stones.

"It's pretty hard, Joe, I admit, but when it comes to secrets, who among us is above reproach?"

"Eh?"

Joe Leslie seems to color up in a manner altogether unnecessary.

"You, for instance, old man—I warrant you do lots of little things that you would hardly care for your wife to know. But"—seeing the other's evident confusion—"let that pass. I will undertake to clear up this mystery for you, Joe, as speedily as possible."

"What shall I do?"

"Try and act as though your suspicions were not aroused—do everything just as you would under ordinary circumstances. Even treat this false friend Barbara warmly—anything but to give our game away in the start."

"I presume I can go on in the same old rut, provided it is not for long."

"I'll promise you that the whole thing will soon be cleared up. There is a screw loose *somewhere*, and I'm going to find it."

Again Joe blushed at the emphasis laid on that word, though Eric was not looking at him, and it did not seem as though he meant any personal reflection.

A guilty conscience, Darrell concluded, needs no accuser, and this man feels the finger of suspicion pointed at him, though he cannot tell from whom it comes.

Used to reading human nature, the detective knows guilt when he sees it.

Although he refrains from making any remark upon the subject, he is in reality quite out of patience with his friend who has thus early betrayed his trust—he could never have believed it of Joe Leslie—he ought to be ashamed of himself, doing anything to make such a sweet

woman unhappy, and if it turns out to be so the detective is determined that he shall eat the husks of remorse, drinking the bitter cup to the very dregs.

"Let me keep these, Joe?" holding up the pictures and the scrap of paper.

"Certainly, and I most earnestly pray they may be the means of proving Lillian's innocence. My life will be wrecked if she proves false."

He did not seem to think of what a position his own secret action placed him in.

"We will hope for the best, Joe."

"Whatever you discover must be a secret between myself and you. I shall in my own way decide what must be done."

Darrell looked at his face while he spoke.

He found nothing vindictive there—instead, he saw a look of deep pain.

To himself he thought:

"If I had done anything wrong, I would like to be tried by a judge like Joe Leslie—he would be merciful. If his wife has erred, he is not the man to shoot her down—he would fight like a tiger in her defense—but I believe under such painful circumstances Joe would cry like a baby—and forgive her."

That was his estimate of the man he had known so long—he forgot just then that Joe was also under a cloud, and that there was something in his life that needed the calcium light of an investigation thrown upon it.

Thus the detective's opinion went up and down like a shuttle-cock—he hardly knew how to take this good-natured giant.

The latter was plainly ill at ease, and having said all he desired, picked up his hat to go.

“Sure you won't smoke, Joe?”

Another wistful glance and a shake of the head.

“I promised Lillian I would never smoke another cigar until she gave me voluntary permission; and as she hates tobacco smoke I presume I must keep my promise always. That is one of the little penalties a man sometimes has to pay when he captures a darling. You can't have your pudding and eat it too—so some of our bachelor freedom must go.”

“Well, the chains are golden ones, forged by love, and if ever I meet a little woman like your wife, by Jove! I'll be tempted to have her forge some.”

“You talk as though Lillian and you were old

friends. You must meet her, Eric—I'll be proud to have you know her—when this thing is settled."

"All right, my boy, I'll keep you to your word. Perhaps she may have a sister, you see."

"She has that, and very much like Lillian."

"Consider the thing fixed and invite me when her sister is on from Chicago."

"I certainly will—what did I do with my hat—ah, here it is on the desk—I will see you again to-morrow, Eric—"

He ceased talking in the middle of a sentence, bent his head down, for the light was gradually fading in the detective's office, and then turning suddenly, said:

"Hello! Darrell, old man, where did you get that—who's been writing down the number of my Twenty-seventh Street house?"

Darrell had forgotten to remove the paper upon which Lillian had written the address, with her gloves on, and Joe Leslie now held it in his hand.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE ON TWENTY-SEVENTH STREET

This was what might, with considerable propriety be called a *contretemps*.

If Joe Leslie recognized the writing as that of his wife, the game was up.

He had no doubt had many letters from her during their courtship days, and knew the style of the chirography well.

One thing favored Darrell.

Any one who has endeavored to write with gloves on will bear witness to the fact that as a general rule they could not swear to their own hand when cold.

So the chances were about ten to one that Joe could not recognize the hand.

The detective was ready to accept the chances.

He maintained his cool demeanor through the emergency.

That was the result of education in his business. Raising his eyebrows with an expression of surprise, he said:

"You don't mean to say that house is yours, friend Joe?"

"That's just what I do!"

The detective was looking for signs of suspicion about the other.

Surprise and curiosity he plainly saw, but it was not so easy to discover the other.

"Come, now, what have you been looking up my house for?"

"On my honor, Joe, I've never set eyes on the building and don't know whether it's stone or brick, three story or two."

"Then what in the deuce—?"

"Patience! Is your house in the market?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps it is one of a number given me by a real estate agent to look up for a friend of mine. I'll preserve the slip," taking it from Joe and folding it up.

"It looks like a woman's writing."

"Yes, all writing does after a man has fallen into the habit of looking for letters day by day—letters that are delayed—Come, you married men are very suspicious."

With that he dexterously whipped the subject around and began talking about something

of decided interest, so that Joe, completely hoodwinked, speedily forgot about the singular little coincidence that had brought this address under the eyes of the owner of the house.

He was not quite done with Joe yet.

"You must own a good deal of property in and around the city, Joe?"

"I do—property left to me by my mother."

"You have no need to work."

"Well, perhaps not. Some day when I take the notion I mean to figure up my income from this property, and if it's a good sum, by Jove! I'll fling business to the winds and take my little wife to Europe for a year—that is, if—"

Darrell did not let him finish.

"Why, man alive, you talk as though you didn't hardly know what property you owned, yourself."

"Neither do I—it's all come to me since I married, and I've been so much taken up with my wife that I haven't found time to attend to it as I should."

Darrell winked hard.

He knew certain facts that would seem to indicate that Joe found time to spend an hour every afternoon with some one besides Lillian.

If so then this was rank perjury.

What was he to think of a hypocrite?

"Jove! that's a queer case. I don't suppose your wife has any idea of where your property lies—never saw such places as this Twenty-seventh Street house, for instance?"

"Heavens! no. That house is an eyesore to me. The neighborhood is not a good one and I will only let it to decent tenants. No, Lillian will never know I own a house there."

Darrell was satisfied.

He had made his point.

Soon after Joe bade him good evening, and hurried away.

It was not far from five o'clock.

Darrell snatched a disguise from a hook and changed his appearance in one minute.

All he wanted was to effect such a change that Joe might not recognize him.

Then he left the office and bolted down stairs after his friend.

Joe was discovered in the crowd, making his way toward the elevated station, and knowing his destination Darrell arrived there first.

They got in the same car.

At this time in the evening it was pretty crowded and both had to stand up.

At Twenty-seventh Street a number left the train and those we follow with the rest.

Darrell observed Joe eagerly consult his watch.

"He's late this evening and no doubt expects a scolding," was his mental comment upon seeing the frown upon Joe's usually good-natured face.

The giant walked along so fast that Eric could hardly keep his place behind him.

They approached the fatal number.

Truly Joe acted like a guilty wretch—he glanced up and down the street as if to make sure no acquaintance was passing.

Deception was a novelty to him—this was the first time Darrell had ever seen his friend acting in a mean role.

When they reached the steps Joe ascended them, took a key out of his pocket and deliberately opened the front door.

The detective was passing at the time, but his quick glance failed to reveal anything of interest.

Evening was coming on, and the shadows of the approaching night had evidently gathered in the hall of the house—he could just see the glass globe of the hanging gas jet in the hall, but it was not lighted.

For that matter there was no light about the house at all, though the neighbors were beginning to illuminate their houses.

Passing down the street a little distance, Eric Darrell crossed over, and came up the other side.

He now noticed that there was a light in the second story front room, though almost ready to swear it had not been there previous to the entrance of the proprietor.

The inside blinds were closed in such a way that Darrell could see nothing.

He was deeply interested.

Whatever this strange mystery attached to Joe's daily visit here might mean, Darrell could not forget that the other was his friend.

He would act as a surgeon might when one whom he regarded highly was brought before him for attention—his fingers would be very tender, but the cruel knife must do its duty.

He was walking slowly along when he almost ran into a female who stood on the edge of the pavement opposite the house.

Her black attire and the veil she wore attracted his attention immediately.

Besides, she was looking upward toward the

windows where the glimmer of light could be seen.

A suspicion flashed into his mind.

He touched the arm of the lady in black.

"Lillian—Mrs. Leslie," he said in a low voice.

A cry came from under the veil.

"Who speaks to me?" gasped the lady.

"It is I—Eric Darrell. This is no place for a lady, especially at such an hour. You may be insulted here."

"But he is here—Joe, my husband, and where he is his wife should not be afraid to go," she said with some bitterness.

"Theoretically true, madam, but there are lots of places in this wicked city where men daily pass and ladies dare not go. You promised to leave this to me and you must keep your word. Take my arm and let me see you to the elevated station."

She might have rebelled, but there was a touch of gentle but firm authority in his tone, and being a woman she yielded, knowing he was right.

On the way to the elevated station she was silent, but finally, upon reaching the steps, she turned to her companion.

"Mr. Darrell, does my husband know that I have sought your advice?"

So intensely interested was she in the answer, that she even held her breath.

"To my knowledge, Mrs. Leslie, Joe does not even suspect you of ever having seen me."

"Thank heaven," she almost gasped, a world of relief showing itself upon her face, for, the better to look at her companion when expecting his answer, she had brushed her veil aside.

"You need not borrow trouble on that score. Act naturally, as though you suspected nothing and had no reason to evade his eye."

She moved uneasily at his words.

Darrell had spoken them with a purpose, just as the surgeon probes for the bullet before making any attempt to extract it.

He believed he had met with a certain share of success too.

"What did he want with you?" she asked, as if to cover her own confusion.

"Merely a matter of business."

"Did he mention me?"

"He said I must come up and meet you sometime—whatever this may turn out, Mrs. Leslie, I know Joe fairly worships you—never doubt that fact. Some things seem hard to put together, but when the truth shines upon them they will be found very simple."

"Like Columbus and the egg, for example."

"Yes, indeed. Now, if at any time you and I should meet in Joe's presence, don't forget to treat me as a stranger."

"I will not."

"Then I shall say good evening, and as a last word, advise you to leave this to me."

"I shall, Mr. Darrell."

She flitted up the station stairs and Darrell, with a long sigh, turned down the street again.

Somehow the pretty wife of his friend quite fascinated him, and he found himself wishing the sister would be like her.

Walking down the street, he soon reached his old stamping ground.

The light burned in the second story room and he believed Joe had not left the house.

For perhaps ten minutes things went on this way.

Then the light suddenly vanished.

A minute later Joe Leslie came out.

Darrell listened intently to see if he spoke to any one at the door but a wagon rattling by prevented his making sure.

Then Joe descended the steps and set briskly off for the elevated station.

The detective did not follow him.

He desired to do a little work around that region, and knew Joe was bound for home.

The house seemed to be dark and deserted, but others were in the same condition, the shades being drawn and shutters closed.

New York people, many of them, act as though their houses were meant to be dungeons, being hermetically sealed to shut out the light.

Darrell surveyed the building a few minutes, crossed over, looked at it more closely, started up the steps, then shook his head negatively.

"Not yet—I'll wait a little," he muttered.

Glancing up and down the street he saw a small grocery store on the corner.

People must eat, and these venders of daily provisions generally know more about those who live in the neighborhood than any other class.

The gossip and small talk of the street passes current here, and the proprietor hears all.

So Darrell made for the grocery.

It was not a very extensive establishment—the owner and his clerk were not busy, and Darrell, picking out the former, asked:

"Can you tell me who lives at No—?"

The man looked at him with a smile.

"A young woman named Mrs. Lester, whose husband I believe is in California—she was in here once or twice—quite a fine-looking lady," returned the groceryman.

"Thanks," replied the detective, turning and leaving the store as suddenly as he entered.

"Jacob, what number did he ask about?" said the proprietor, turning to his clerk.

The boy gave it, at which the other whistled.

"That's what they call a bull on me. I was five numbers out of the way. But let it pass. He didn't want to buy nothing."

The blunder was destined to give Darrell trouble however.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN DRESSED AS A BULL FIGHTER

When Eric Darrell left the little grocery on the corner, it was with a bad feeling at his heart.

It seemed as though a cold, clammy hand had suddenly come in contact with that member of his anatomy, and chilled it.

Could this thing be?

If Joe Leslie turned out to be that moral leper, a bigamist, Darrell believed he would never put any trust in human nature again.

Did it not look like it?

Nothing was lacking.

Good heavens! even the names were almost alike—Leslie and Lester.

He was horrified—dazed—dumfounded.

Then his teeth came together with a snap, and he swore he would solve this mystery—the man might be living two lives—others had done it before—perhaps many in New York are doing it to-day

In his time Darrell had met with just such cases as this, and he believed his experience justified him in solving the puzzle.

So her husband was in California.

It was a likely story.

California must be very near by if he could drop in six times a week.

He passed the house again and found that there were still no signs of light.

Evidently those who lived there, perhaps enjoying the luxuries of the season, knew how to hide their light under a bushel.

Darrell remembered what Joe had said—he had long since despaired of renting the house, and probably did not try very hard.

Then again about his income—no wonder he did not know how he stood if he had to keep two separate establishments running.

They might do that economically out in Salt Lake City among the Mormons but it is quite an expensive luxury in New York.

So the detective made his way down to Twenty-third Street and entering a dairy kitchen where a thousand were being served to the music of an orchestra, had his dinner.

He took his time over it, read the evening

paper, and when he finally passed out it was well on to eight o'clock.

Then he smoked a cigar and watched the passers by for half an hour more.

Then he sauntered away.

At nine o'clock he found himself one of a little crowd gathered at the door of a hall.

A masquerade was to take place here, and as carriage after carriage drove up, depositing nymphs and devils, cavaliers and knights, upon the pavement, the crowd laughed in a good-natured way.

Some of the rougher element might have indulged in jeers or remarks that would have brought on trouble, but for their fear of the law, which was represented by two stalwart policemen, armed with their long night sticks which are a dread to the heathen of the slums.

Darrell was interested too, and stood with the rest, looking on.

While thus engaged, a gentleman and lady left a hack and walked toward the entrance.

He represented a Spanish bull fighter, and with his splendid figure made a remarkably good *matador*, while his companion, as a lady of cards, caused a ripple of admiration among the lookers-on.

Both were fully masked, and, having wraps over their costumes, only a portion of the latter were seen; but it was evident that the lady was possessed of a lovely figure, her arms were rounded and perfect, while her neck, glimpses of which could be seen, was dazzlingly white, and royally built.

Darrell looked at her with interest.

Then his eyes fell on her escort.

He started.

Surely that figure was owned by none other than Joe Leslie.

What was he doing at the ball?

Was this his wife?

Of course it must be—the figure and beautiful neck corresponded with what Darrell remembered of Mrs. Leslie.

Still, he could not help but think it odd, even at that brief moment, for Joe to bring his lovely wife here to this ball.

True, it was a respectable affair, and many good people attended it, but none of the first families in New York would dream of being seen at the public masquerade—at least if they came they went away without unmasking.

As the couple passed him he could not resist saying aloud:

"Hallo! Joe!"

The man seemed to start, and muttered something to his companion, at which she laughed, but he did not look around to see who had spoken.

Others were following them.

Darrell stood a while longer, and then left the scene.

Somehow or other he was troubled—he knew not exactly why.

If that was Lillian with her husband, it was all well and good—although surprised at Joe taking his wife to such a carnival, so long as her husband was with her it was all right

But was it Lillian?

This thought kept crowding into his brain.

He could not expel it.

After a little he became angry with himself for brooding over the matter so.

"Hang it, I can settle the matter easily," he muttered, as he found himself at the foot of the stairs leading to the elevated station.

So up he ran.

It was not a great while later when he found himself walking along the street on which the Leslies lived.

He had never seen their house before, but having the number speedily found it.

Of course it was one of a row. How neat and clean everything looked up in this region when compared with the neighborhood of the Twenty-seventh Street house.

His sympathies naturally ran in favor of Lillian—he seemed to believe she was the more innocent of Joe's dupes—provided the case was really as bad as it seemed.

Making sure he had the right number, as the houses were built pretty much alike, he ran up the steps and pulled the bell.

A minute later a girl came to the door.

"I wish to see Mr. Leslie."

"He is out, sir."

"Ah!"

Darrell's suspicions took firmer ground.

The girl held the door open a crack, as though it were secured by a chain bolt.

"Mrs. Leslie will do—can I see her?"

He almost held his breath waiting for the answer—it seemed as though the fate of a seemingly happy household depended upon it—whether Joe Leslie were saint or sinner.

"Mrs. Leslie is in—what name, please?"

"You may say—stay, here is my card," believing the girl would have no chance to read it on the way.

He handed her a calling card which simply bore his name.

In a minute she came back.

"Mrs. Leslie will see you, sir."

The door opened.

Eric Darrell found himself under the roof of Joe Leslie's little "bird's nest," as the latter was fond of styling it.

Everything around him showed evidences of good taste and plenty of money.

Poor bachelor Eric heaved a sigh as he noted the comfortable air of the cozy house.

"What a fool," he muttered, "but some men never know when they're well off. With a wife and a home like his, Joe ought to be the happiest man in New York. Seems to me these things generally go to the ones least capable of appreciating them."

By this time the philosopher, in following the servant along the hall, came to the open library door, through which she motioned him to enter.

He did so.

Here his old bachelor soul was worse rattled

than ever—such a dream of bliss may have come to him over his post-prandial cigar, but he had never believed it could be realized to a human being here below.

The soft lights, the cases of books, the cheery fire in the large grate, and, chief of all, the pretty little lady seated at the table engaged in some delicate fancy work—it all took poor Eric's breath away.

He had sense enough to walk up and shake hands.

"You see the plight I am in—you will forgive my not rising, Mr. Darrell," she said, referring to her lap full of silk threads and such odds and ends.

"Certainly, Mrs. Leslie, don't move, I beg. I will find a seat near by," he returned.

She was looking at him eagerly.

"Mr. Darrell, it is not accident that brings you up here to-night?" she said, and there was a question in her eyes as well as in her voice.

He cannot get out of this.

"I came on a little business."

"You asked to see Mr. Leslie?"

"In reality I expected to see you."

"Ah! you have already solved our terrible

mystery—tell me the worst—does Joe visit that awful house to play cards?”

It is hard work dealing with a woman—she is apt to ask so many questions and demand an answer—then, if important facts are told her she may in a fit of pique or anger disclose them to the very one who should not know.

Darrell knows all this.

He understands how to manage the gentler sex, and in the present instance does not mean to tell one whit more than is necessary.

“I am sorry to say, Mrs. Leslie, that the case is not yet closed—indeed, the complications are growing more serious—but,” as he observes the look of pain on her sweet face, “I expect and hope to soon clear it all up.”

“Heaven grant it,” she replied.

Luckily Lillian had considerable reserve force in her nature, and now that this was brought into play, she gave promise of rising to meet the exigencies of the occasion.

Darrell admired her courage.

He found it harder to believe evil of her than he did of Joe, for he had great respect for the gentler sex, and believed all men had a good share of the old Adam in them—some fought

the good fight and conquered—others lay down their arms and surrendered, while many ran to meet the evil half way, so misshapen were their souls.

Alone, when speculating upon this strange double case, he might figure out this thing or that by force of logic; but when looking upon that truthful, lovely face, and into those calm eyes, he was ready to exclaim:

“Shame upon you, Eric Darrell, for ever even thinking this little woman and wrong could have anything in common. She’s an angel if ever there was one on earth, and I hope her sister is built upon the same pattern.”

“Where is Joe?” he asked, suddenly.

“You haven’t seen him then?”

“I—no, indeed, not to speak to since he was in my office this afternoon.”

“I—thought he had gone to you—he spoke your name in connection with the matter.”

“What matter, may I ask?”

“The sad affair that took him from me to-night.”

Sad affair!

As Darrell saw again in imagination the gay surroundings of the hall where the grand *bal*

masque was being held, he ground his teeth in silent rage, but knowing that a pair of sharp eyes were upon him he did not allow his fury to find a vent.

"Indeed! I am just as much in the dark as ever, Mrs. Leslie—enlighten me."

"I presume it's the same sad business he went to see you about to-day."

Darrell thought not.

"You know he has a young clerk and cashier in his employ, Georgie Kingsley, of whom Joe is very fond. Of late he has been led to believe the boy is getting a little wild—reports have been reaching Joe of little things, showing that Georgie is keeping bad company, and gambling. I know this has worried Joe of late."

Darrell thought something else might be giving him a nervous spell too—no man can live a double life except at a great mental strain, for the risk of sudden exposure must be terrible.

"So he's gone to try and save poor Georgie to-night, has he? Noble-hearted old Joe."

She could not help but catch something of the sneer under his words, and trembled as she realized that the detective had grave doubts.

"He said he would probably go to your room and get your company."

"He changed his mind, no doubt," muttered the detective—indignation was apt to make him tell more than discretion warranted.

"What do you mean—you know something that you do not want to tell me. I insist on your speaking. Have you seen my husband?"

"I believe I have."

"Where was it?"

"Entering the hall where a *bal masque* was being held—quite a large affair."

"Alone?" breathlessly.

"No—with a lady. Good heavens! Mrs. Leslie, take it calmly, I beg of you!"

CHAPTER VI

MARIAN

He need not have been so alarmed.

True, the blood seemed to leave Lillian's face, and she gasped for breath, but a moment later she appeared so calm that even the detective was amazed.

His admiration increased, for he saw this woman was no pretty doll, to faint at the first breath of adversity.

"Do you know this as a fact, Mr. Darrell?" she asked in steady tones.

"I do not, positively, and I think we ought to give Joe the benefit of the doubt."

"I shall do more than that. Until with his own lips he acknowledges such a thing to me, I will believe him innocent—I will trust him as I have always done, as the best and truest man on earth. And yet it cuts home to even have such suspicions aroused—oh, if Marian were *only* here!"

"Your sister?"

"Yes, the sister I love so dearly, and who would be such a comfort to me. She always believed in Joe. It would be a great shock to her."

Eric was struck by a sudden thought.

They always came with a rush, and at times might fall under the name of an inspiration.

"Have you your sister's photograph handy, Mrs. Leslie? Your husband spoke of her so much and said I must meet her some day. I am quite interested, and would like to see her picture."

"That is it on the mantel."

She did not evidently suspect the awful thought that came into his brain.

He walked over and looked at the photograph.

It attracted him very much.

The face was very like Lillian's, only the hair and eyes were dark.

"I shall expect an invitation here when your sister comes on, Mrs. Leslie. She is in Chicago now, I believe."

"That is her home, but she is now traveling in California with a party of friends."

California!

The mention of that far-away State sent a cold chill down his back.

Was it not the grocery man who had said the beautiful Mrs. Lester's husband was in California?

Somehow he made the application, and the effect was a decided chill.

It was growing blacker for Joe.

"I shall take a run down and see if I can find Joe—he may be at my room waiting for me—who knows? Can I trust you to keep this matter from him, Mrs. Leslie—supposing this is all a mistake and that he is innocent, would you ever want him to believe that you harbored such suspicions?"

"No, no, I would not," she sobbed.

"Then do your part—you can act it I am sure. Appear natural—show no unusual coldness or warmth of affection—try not to meet his eye or your own may betray you. If he insists on finding out what ails you, retreat in the usual plea of a headache."

"I will not fail you, Mr. Darrell. You go about your work with the prayers of a faithful wife following you."

He believed it then—he would have staked

his life on her truth—and yet in the near future such terrible doubts were to arise.

“Surely that talisman ought to keep any man who is half a man, from evil—a loving mother and a faithful wife are the lodestones that have saved many a weak man from the pit of destruction. Good-night, Mrs. Leslie. Remember, should the worst come, you can depend upon Eric Darrell as your brother.”

He had said more than he intended to, but he was not cold-blooded like a fish, and the evident distress of this angel on earth had wrought up all his feelings.

Just then he felt as though he could have pommeled Joe Leslie with the greatest of pleasure.

Any man was a brute who would give a woman like this sweet creature, pain.

So Eric strode away angry with the wickedness of the world in general, and this friend of his in particular.

If Joe Leslie turned out a rascal he could see no palliating circumstance connected with the case, and according to his ideas the man ought to be drawn and quartered.

Hardly knowing where he was going, Darrell

brought up at the hall where the *bal masque* was in progress.

It was still early—not later than half past ten, and the affair had only started.

Any one could get in on payment of the regular price, two dollars, although none were allowed on the main floor but masks.

Darrell went in.

He had seen these things before, and hence had little interest in the ball itself.

Most of the characters were old too, although here and there some genius had devised something new, and worth looking at.

Eric had other ideas in view.

Monks, flower girls, Indians, Chinese, knights, fortune tellers, dames and the endless chain of historical personages such an event gathers, passed before him without exciting more than a slight smile or a single glance of admiration.

He was looking for the couple upon whom he meant to bestow his interest.

Soon he sighted them.

From that time on Eric seldom took his eyes off the pair.

He imagined he detected certain little peculiarities in the man's walk that marked him as Joe Leslie.

As for the woman, Eric became quite interested trying to make her out—in figure she certainly resembled Lillian, and this only added to his eager pursuit.

Another point he noticed—her hair was dark.

Was she the one who had entered his mind?

He noticed that when they danced it was always together—other couples might separate but the Spanish bull fighter and the Lady of Cards seemed inseparable.

Probably they were greeted with more or less lively sallies in the badinage that passed current among the dancers, but the size of the bull fighter deterred any envious swains from attempting to relieve him of his partner.

Darrell noted the envious actions of some of the male maskers who could not find partners, and made up his mind there would be trouble yet unless the couple withdrew early

The detective had managed to get below by bribing a keeper.

He did not go out upon the floor, but remained under the gallery.

It was not very light here.

Now and then some promenading couple would pass by, chatting and laughing, a red clad

Mephistopheles fanning a pretty shepherdess, or a portly friar joking with Queen Elizabeth.

One thing is always noticeable about these *bal masques*—the ladies never assume a grotesque costume, always endeavoring to appear charming, according to their own ideas, and leaving the funny part of the business to the male sex.

The couple whom Darrell was anxious to watch had mingled with the crowd dancing and for some little time he lost sight of them.

He began to grow a little anxious and was just thinking of changing his quarters, when all of a sudden they appeared in view close by.

They were heading for the dark spot under the gallery where only a few persons had gathered.

The lady was holding both hands up to her head, as if to keep her mask from falling while her tall escort forced a passage.

Eric shrank back behind a pillar.

The two came within ten feet of where he stood, and there halted.

"Can you fix it?" he heard her ask.

"I will try, Marian," was the reply.

That name—it confirmed the detective's worst fears—he could believe anything now.

The Lady of Cards handed her mask to her

companion, who immediately endeavored to re-fasten the string that had broken loose.

Meanwhile she stood with her face bared, looking out upon the throng.

What a miserable thing it was that the light was so poor under the gallery.

Darrell just then would have given a hundred dollars for one good square look at her face.

Oh, for an electric torch to suddenly light up the scene and reveal those features to his gaze.

He used his eyes to the utmost, but it was not at all satisfactory, for her face was in the shadow; but he had an idea she was very like the picture he had looked at recently—the photograph of Lillian's sister.

Presently the bull fighter had succeeded in re-securing the string.

He tied the mask on for her

His manner was very courtly and gentle, but one spectator did not enjoy it at all.

This was Eric.

His thoughts would go, in spite of him, to that heavenly room where he had left a sweet and faithful wife waiting for her Joe to return.

Somehow Eric felt savage to-night, and he wondered whether it would not serve this man

just right if he did get into trouble with some of the envious young beaux who followed him about as though only waiting a good chance to carry off his partner by force.

A traitor deserved such punishment.

"I'll never believe in a man again," said Eric to himself, filled with shame and disgust for his sex; "by Jove! they're all alike, a miserable crowd of deceivers, every one."

He forgot that he belonged to the same sex, and that his very indignation proved his words exaggerated, since he could not share in such evil plottings, and there must be others like him.

He wandered up and down.

Now and then he saw the couple, but much of the time they were lost to his view.

Darrell remained near the exit.

It was nearly twelve o'clock, when the order to unmask would be given.

Some who did not care to remain and be recognized were already flitting.

He believed those whom he watched would do likewise, and it was his desire to get outside at the same time to hear the directions given to the driver if any were uttered.

Just at this moment, close by, he heard sounds of an uproar.

These things are generally prevented at public balls by the presence of the police, but no officers were in sight now—perhaps they had gone into the refreshment room.

Darrell instantly had a suspicion of the truth, and his eyes were immediately directed toward the *melee*.

Just as he suspected, in the struggling crowd he saw the tall form of the Spanish bull fighter—the man was dealing blows right and left and had already sent several audacious assailants rolling in the dust of the hall floor.

CHAPTER VII

A BRAND FROM THE BURNING

The detective was a man.

He admired courage and grit, no matter in whom it was found, and when he saw the Spanish bull fighter holding his own against the number who had assailed him he could not but express this feeling.

It seemed as though these young bloods were furious because the other kept his partner to himself, and allowed her to dance with no one else—it is always the case that a pack of such hot heads may be found at a public gathering, and trouble often ensues.

Perhaps the Lady of Cards, secure behind her mask, had flirted with some of them, and had driven them wild.

It is human nature to covet what we cannot have and their anger toward the giant bull fighter had grown intense.

As we have seen, - it culminated in what threatened to be a riot.

The woman was frightened now—she trembled, and cowered behind her protector.

He stood up like a rock before her.

Twice his arm had shot out and on each occasion one of his assailants had gone down.

They pressed him hard.

The bull fighter turned to the right and left and defended himself gallantly, while he shielded his companion as best he could.

It was a singular spectacle to be seen at a New York public ball.

When passion rules men's minds their surroundings have no effect on them.

They would fight in a tomb, over the dead.

Seeing that in all probability the rascals would get the better of the man, Darrell pushed that way; at this moment one of the men grasped the lady by the wrist.

She screamed.

The bull fighter turned like a mad tiger, saw what was transpiring, threw the assailants who were clinging to him, and plunged at the man who was grasping the lady's arm and endeavoring to drag her away, for the music still kept

up, and many were dancing all unconscious of the *melee*.

There was a tremendous rush, the bull fighter caught the wretch and whirled him, spinning like a teetotum, ten feet away. Never did a dancing dervish spin so merrily.

Then came an awful crash, as the man struck a swaying column of dancers, who immediately toppled over upon him.

By this time the detective was at the side of the bull fighter.

"Keep back, you young fools! Keep back, I say, or I'll land the whole of you in the Tombs!"

His words were heard.

Backed up as they were with the shining barrel of a revolver, they commanded respect.

By this time the management had succeeded in getting the officers from the supper-room to the spot, and upon seeing them come, the young fellows who had been the cause of the disturbance slunk away, losing themselves in the crowd.

The management apologized to the bull fighter when they learned what had occurred, but his companion seemed to have received a nervous shock—at any rate they retired for their wraps.

Darrell moved outside.

There was something more he desired to learn and the chance must soon come.

He waited.

Just at twelve they came.

The hour for unmasking had arrived, and there was quite a high time within.

This displeased the detective, for he was afraid lest he might not hear what he desired.

The couple walked down the pavement in search of the carriage, which was waiting near by, the driver having received instructions.

They soon reached it.

Darrell hovered near.

The bull fighter assisted his companion in and then entered himself.

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver, probably not knowing but what they had another engagement at some private ball.

A burst of laughter from the house deadened the reply, but Darrell's keen ears caught:

"—Twenty-seventh Street."

It was enough.

He felt down-spirited.

In so far as he could see ahead, the case was a settled one—Joe Leslie was guilty.

He seemed to feel it as keenly as though it were a brother of his.

Poor Lillian! that it should come to this in one short year.

It would have seemed incredible, but he was used to meeting with strange things, and being of a philosophical train of mind could take things pretty much as they came.

So Darrell turned homeward.

There was nothing more to be done that night.

He remembered that on the morning he had engaged to watch the house in which the Leslies lived.

That strange man would come and must be tracked to discover his identity.

It was a task Darrell did not like.

Every time he thought of it he saw the face of Lillian before him, and in the depth of those liquid eyes there appeared such a world of truth that the detective was fain to shake his head.

Experienced man of the world as he was, he could not believe her guilty.

There must be some mistake.

So he made his way to his rooms, feeling depressed over the events of the night.

He hated the thought of his next meeting with the lady—how could he face her and tell her what he had seen and heard?

“Hang the foolish fellow—how could he treat such an angel in that way?”

Hold on, Mr. Darrell, before twenty-four hours have flown you will perhaps have changed your mind and concluded that even angels may be of the earth, earthy.

When he arrived at his apartments it was about half-past twelve.

As he opened the door he saw a card below.

When he had applied the burning match to the gas, he picked this up.

“Hello!” was his exclamation.

His eyes had fallen upon a name.

“Joseph Gregory Leslie.”

Turning the card over he found, scribbled in pencil, the words:

“Called to see you—may come in later to-night. Some important business.”

When he had read this the detective scratched his head and mused.

“How is this—he must have run down here first. Come in later, eh? Well, who knows but what after he has seen *Marian* home he may run down?”

He stopped to listen to a carriage rumbling along the street—at this time of night they were not very frequent here, and when it stopped in front of the house he smiled.

“Ah, he has seen her home and come down to carry out his promise to Lillian. The story of the erring clerk may not be all moonshine.”

He put his head out of the window.

The carriage lamps shone below.

It was a hack, drawn by dark horses.

So had the other been.

Darrell had not the slightest idea but that they were one and the same—he flattered himself that he could read Joe Leslie like a book, for the man was a poor plotter.

Just as he suspected, there were footsteps on the stairs.

Some one was coming.

A knock sounded on his door.

Opening it, who should be standing there but Joe Leslie in the flesh?

“You are home at last—I have been here twice before and found you out,” he said.

Darrell believed once would answer, but of course he made no such remark.

“Well, come in and sit down.”

"No, I haven't time."

"What do you want with me?" asked Darrell, just as though he did not already know.

"Can you give me an hour or so?"

"Yes."

"I have a favorite clerk—I am afraid he has fallen into bad company. For his mother's sake I want to rescue him before it is too late."

Darrell admired the motive however much he distrusted the man.

"Wait a minute and I will go with you."

He kicked off his slippers and drew on his shoes. Then a coat and hat followed. The minute was not yet over when he announced himself in readiness.

Truly, Eric Darrell would do for a lightning change artist on the stage.

They passed down the stairs of the house, which had apartments for gentlemen only.

New York is full of these bachelor dens, some of them having suites of rooms furnished in a gorgeous manner that speaks of the sybarite taste of the rich young or old owner. The bachelors of to-day live for their own comfort, surrounded by all the luxuries money can purchase for them.

No one thinks of pitying them any longer, least of all do they themselves feel forlorn.

People who love a home may sigh at such a picture, but it is the truth in all large cities and New York above the rest. On the way down Joe spoke:

"You know the places where such a young man is apt to be found, Eric?"

"Well, I ought to—my business carries me into them every week," replied the other.

"Then let us make the rounds."

He spoke wearily.

Why not?

When a man has been dancing for several hours, he cannot feel as fresh as a daisy—it does not stand to reason.

They entered the hack.

Darrell gave his first address to Joe who repeated it to the driver.

Away they went.

"Hello! what's wrong with your hand?" asked the detective. The carriage lamps gave enough light for him to see that Joe had his handkerchief wrapped around the knuckles of his right hand.

"Took a tumble up a dark flight of stairs

when I was looking awhile back and bruised my knuckles."

Darrell smiled but made no remark. He thought he knew how that hand had become bruised—it was in a more honorable business than falling up stairs—in defending a weak and helpless woman against ruffians.

"You know some of these places then, Joe?"

"My driver knew of several, but I had hard work getting in."

Darrell thought so.

"Perhaps they did not think I wanted to play, and may have been suspicious of my intentions."

"No doubt. If you rescued some young fellow from their clutches, it meant less money for their pockets."

They lapsed into silence.

Soon the vehicle stopped.

They entered a gambling den.

Joe quickly declared his clerk was not there and they proceeded to another.

Four had been visited, and in the last one he discovered the young man at the green baize, his face flushed with wine and excitement.

The detective drew him out and brought him to his employer, at sight of whom he turned white and put his hands to his eyes.

Joe Leslie talked to him beautifully—even that hard-hearted detective, Eric Darrell, who had seen so much of the world, had to turn his head away and wink hard to dry up his tears.

As for the boy—he was hardly more—what he heard so affected him that he caught hold of Joe's arm and sobbed outright.

"As heaven is my judge, Mr. Leslie, from this hour I will never again yield to temptation in any shape. What you said about my mother has taken the scales from my eyes and I see."

Even Darrell knew he would stand firm.

Joe Leslie had saved one soul.

CHAPTER VIII

THE JEHU ADDS TO THE MYSTERY

It gave Eric Darrell a strange feeling to hear Joe talk in the vein he did.

Of all men on earth—or women either—he despised a hypocrite.

Could he believe Joe sincere in what he said about deceit, when such a load of suspicion was resting over his own head?

Eric was badly rattled.

He believed and yet doubted.

Something must soon come up to decide the question one way or another.

On the way to his rooms, where Joe was to put him down, the latter fell asleep in the corner, so no words passed between them.

When the hack came to a stop Joe woke up.

"Hello here, where are we?"

"At my den," and Eric got out as the driver opened the door.

"Then I can have another nap before I reach my home."

"Good night, Joe."

"Don't forget to-morrow morning, Eric."

"I shan't, you may depend upon it."

As a sudden thought flashed through his mind he turned and looked at the driver.

Surely this was not the same man who had driven Joe from the *bal masque*.

The detective did not remember the number of the other vehicle, but had seen the man—both wore the regulation tall stove-pipe hat, without which no cabby is ever seen in New York, if he has any respect for himself, but there was a decided difference in the height of the men.

This again puzzled Eric.

"What is your name, driver?" he asked, as the other was about to mount his box.

"John Mulligan, sor."

"German, of course?" smiling.

"Yis, sor, direct from Cork."

"Where can you be found in the morning about ten o'clock?"

The man gave his stand.

"Then consider yourself engaged by myself from ten to twelve, and wait for me."

"All right, sor."

The hack rattled down the street.

Darrell looked after it and shook his head—he did not know really what to think.

In all the strange cases he had handled in the past, he could not remember one which had presented such a confusing front as this.

It faced both ways.

He was not yet ready to believe either side until stronger proofs were presented.

At any rate another day would surely develop new features bearing on the case, and from these he would be able to get conclusions.

He retired at a quarter to three.

It was his intention to rise at eight, and when he jumped out of bed the clock lacked but a few minutes of the hour.

Before nine he had breakfasted in a neighboring cafe.

The other inmates of the bachelor apartment house had no idea of the occupation the detective followed.

He was a quiet fellow and did not seek acquaintances—besides, in New York, people get acquainted only through regular channels—two families might live next door for several years

and their ways and hours are so different that the members hardly know their neighbors by sight.

It was now getting on toward the time when he ought to be up town.

He ran down to his office first, and blossomed out as a first-class masher, of the type who frequent the matinees—real lady killers.

Then he next made his way up town on the elevated road, and got off at Eighty-ninth Street.

In a short time he was in the drug store near the home of the Leslies.

The proprietor was talkative and friendly.

It was just three minutes of ten when a gentleman passed along the pavement in the direction of the house under surveillance.

He turned and came into the drug store ostensibly to buy a cigar, but in reality, as the detective guessed, to pass the time.

Just as the clock was about striking he hurried out and was soon mounting the steps leading to the Leslie mansion.

Eric shrugged his shoulders.

"There's no accounting for tastes," he muttered.

"Yes," laughed the druggist, "he picked out the poorest weed in the box."

But Darrell was thinking of something else.

He had in mind the stalwart figure and pleasing face of Joe Leslie.

Between the two he saw no choice.

Still, this man was in a way distinguished by his poetical appearance—his face was smooth, all but a wavy mustache, and he wore his hair down upon his shoulders.

Eric spent some time talking to the druggist, but he kept watch upon the Leslie domicile. At eleven the stranger came out. He was given egress by Mrs. Leslie, and Darrell was put in mind of the photograph Joe had shown him.

His business now was to discover who this gentleman was.

He followed him to the elevated railroad, and went in the car next to that which the man under surveillance entered.

Thus, at about eleven twenty-three, he followed the other along Twenty-third Street and saw him enter a certain building among the handsome stores.

Still pursuing his man, carefully keeping him under his eye, he watched until the other had entered a room on the top floor.

There was a door-plate in sight.

Going closer the detective read:

"Paul Prescott—Artist."

He knew the name—the owner had quite a reputation as a painter, but Eric had never as yet heard of him as a lady killer.

His next work was to get some information concerning Mr. Prescott.

There were other offices below, and entering one which seemed to be that of an ivory carver, he introduced the subject by saying that he had occasion to make use of an artist at his home, and wished to make certain inquiries concerning the gentleman above.

"I do not like to say anything," remarked the ivory carver.

"Oh, I'm not going to ask about his work—that stands on its own merits—but as he would have to be a member of my family for a time if he undertook the job, I would like to know if he is a perfect gentleman."

"I have no occasion to believe otherwise."

"Married?"

"N—no."

"You seem to hesitate—am I to infer that you have any reason to believe otherwise?"

"I used to think he was, but of late he told me he was a widower."

"Oh, that's it. I suppose he has lots of people visit his studio?"

"Quite a number."

"Ladies and gentlemen?"

"Ladies particularly—he's very fond of the gentle sex, and they quite make a hero of him."

Darrell smiled.

He had seen stage favorites whom the silly women of New York were wont to rave over, and knew just how foolishly they could act.

Thank heaven all women are not alike, and yet their weak points are more or less developed in the whole sex, as with men.

He sighed as he thought of it, and then he turned again, loyal to the resolve he had made not to condemn Lillian without the most absolute proof.

As he left the building he remembered the hack driver.

Could he reach his stand before twelve?

He started off—a street car assisted him up Sixth Avenue, and he arrived just five minutes before the noon hour.

John was there.

He had the same horses as on the previous night, and showed no marks of his late hours.

At sight of the detective he made no sign of recognition, which was quite natural, for the latter's disguise was complete.

"Hello, John, I want your vehicle," Eric said.

"I'm engaged just now, sor."

"Yes, warming your heels. John, I'm the gentleman who engaged you last night."

The man made a peculiar face.

"Tell that till the marines, sor. Ain't I got eyes—phat good are they if I don't see?"

"Well, they're no good if they can't see that—five dollars, pay for the two hours you've waited."

The man looked at the bill and took it.

"Faith an' now I know ye're the gentlemon," he said with a leer.

It is strange yet true that such a man can always see better with a bank bill over his eyes.

"Did my friend Leslie get home all right?"

"Yes, sor."

"Anybody waiting up for him?" carelessly.

"His wife I reckon, sor—leastways she let him in directly the kerriage stopped."

This was a point for the detective.

He made a note of it.

"Have you driven for Mr. Leslie before?"

"Several times, sor."

"Fine fellow."

"That's where yees are correct—he's a man I could do lots for."

This was not flattery—the true ring could be detected in such praise—it came from the heart.

"How did it come he had another driver earlier in the night?"

"Him—Mr. Joseph Leslie—sure I took him from his house and brought him back and divil another driver did he have at all. Phat are yees drivin' at? I dunno!"

"I made a mistake, John—I see it now."

To himself, however, this hunter of men was saying:

"Probably Joe has bought this fellow up, body and soul—that would account for his desire to serve him."

Nothing could be more easily done, for the man looked like one who would be faithful.

If this were the case it would be love's labor lost to attempt to get any intelligence out of such a man.

Still, Eric Darrell prided himself on his manner of cross questioning, and he began to work the jehu in a manner that was novel to say the least.

Thus he found that to all appearances John had driven down town, and taken the gentleman to several places besides the apartment house where he held forth.

Altogether they had visited three houses where games of chance were going on but there was so much trouble effecting an entrance to these places that it had consumed much time.

If this were true it would make the puzzle darker than ever.

The question was, could John be trusted?

He had to watch the man keenly in order to read him at all.

An Irishman can dissemble about as well as the next one, and this jehu was a particularly bright boy, from the "ould dart."

"Did you meet any one you knew about a quarter of twelve?" asked the detective.

"Did I—yes, it was just striking the midnight hour when I spoke to Mike Crotty, the night police at the corner av Broadway and Worth Street."

"I know him—what remarks passed?"

"We both spoke av the bells—and Mike towld me about a dancing in the moonlight he saw wanst in ould Ireland, when the fairies came out

to howld their only ball—it was at this hour he seen it and lost his mind. Whin he found it again the beastly work had stopped and the fair-ies were gone.”

“Well, I guess it’s too late for me to do what I meant to. I won’t need you to-day, John. Sometime I may want your help.”

With these words Eric Darrell coolly turned and walked away. The Irishman looked after him quizzically.

“He’s an odd genius, but, d’ye know, I rather like the man. Just as if I don’t know where he’s gone. Hope he finds Mike Crotty on deck this fine day.”

CHAPTER IX

JOE'S SECRET

Mike Crotty was on deck. Eric readily found him.

The man was a stranger to him, but there is a mystic tie between the detectives and police in a great city—they work in harmony.

Soon the two men were conversing with the greatest freedom.

Crotty had often heard of Detective Darrell, and was only too glad to supply any information that lay in his power. He remembered meeting the hackman and spoke of the bells ringing out the midnight hour.

There could be no mistake.

When Eric left the officer, he was a badly puzzled man to be sure. Instead of having solved the mystery it was assuming even darker proportions, and the chances seemed equally divided.

Was Joe guilty or not?

If, as these men agreed, he was at a certain place just as the solemn midnight hour rang out, how could he have been at the *bal masque*—it was at that hour of unmasking the Spanish bull fighter and his consort, the Lady of Cards, drove away in another vehicle and yet—that man possessed the stalwart figure of Joe Leslie—Eric believed he would know it anywhere—he had answered to the name of Joe, while his companion was Marian.

The difficulties in the way might have daunted a less persevering officer than Darrell.

They only spurred him on to renewed exertions. He gloried in a puzzle.

To a man of his nature it was the most pleasurable work in the world, studying the intricacies of a mystery, grasping a thread in the labyrinthine maze, following it along inch by inch, until the whole thing resolved itself into a solved problem.

Then, when the end came, how proud he would be to survey his work.

He began to give Joe the benefit of the doubt. This was one point gained.

It is a rule in American courts never to adjudge a man guilty until he has been proven so

—the law looks upon him as innocent, and all efforts of the prosecutor are directed toward proving the charges.

In some other countries the opposite is the case and the accused has to prove his innocence.

Eric Darrell was gradually applying this former principle to the case in question.

Perhaps Joe might be innocent, and this cloud hanging over him be the result of circumstantial evidence.

At any rate the detective hoped so.

He looked at his watch mechanically.

Just now the thought came into his head that he must find out all about Joe before another night had spread its mantle over the city.

The time dragged along.

He had some work to do in his office, and this consumed something like an hour.

Then he made his way slowly in the direction of Twenty-seventh Street.

It was about four when he came in sight of the house around which clustered so much that was mysterious.

Sauntering along, he kept watch for Joe, feeling almost sure the other would come.

Sure enough, at the regular time his tall figure came in view.

Darrell managed it so that at this moment he was nearly opposite the house.

He could see Joe without looking in a particular manner across the street, and he saw that the other appeared nervous and worried.

Was his guilty secret wearing on his mind?

Something undoubtedly disturbed him.

Any one could see that from the expression on his face.

As usual, when he came in front of the house, he turned and looked up the street, as though he were afraid lest some one whom he knew would recognize him.

Then he went up the steps.

There was no ringing the bell.

With a key he opened the door as though proprietor there.

Then Darrell, passing on, lost sight of him.

The detective crossed the street beyond, and came on down, intending to pass the house again.

He changed his mind.

When just opposite, looking up he saw that fortune beckoned him.

The door was ajar.

Joe had been a trifle careless, and made a mistake when he thought he closed the door.

What could be better?

Mr. Darrell was a man quick to make up his mind, and he instantly saw a chance here to further his plans.

Without hesitating an instant he advanced up the steps, stood upon the door-step, and seemed to glance around carelessly, when in reality he was listening to catch any sound that might come from the interior.

Another moment and he had entered.

Perhaps some one saw him, but he had put on an air of proprietorship such as Joe wore, and curious eyes must have simply reached the conclusion that his coming was but another link in the chain of mystery surrounding the house.

Once in the hall, the detective quietly closed the door, making sure it was fast.

Enough light came in through the glass above to show him the stairs.

There was carpet on the floor.

Near by were folding doors, and, as they stood ajar, Darrell poked his head through, not merely out of curiosity, but because he felt that he had an interest in the matter.

The parlor was furnished.

It was no empty house into which he had come thus surreptitiously.

He listened.

Not a sound from within.

How strange it seemed.

What could it all mean?

Vague and even terrible ideas flashed into his mind—was Joe connected with some secret cabal or society that met here every day?

Perhaps some awful secret was gnawing at his vitals, and daily sapping his life.

What was that?

A door slammed above.

Eric was glad to hear it, for he realized that the house had something human about it.

As near as he could judge the sound came from upstairs.

Then he would not have to grapple with the demons of the underground world.

At times even the oddest fancies will surge through the most prosaic mind.

One of the thoughts that had come to him was that possibly Joe had become connected with some gang of counterfeiters—he had heard of things just as strange—and although it seemed a preposterous idea in connection with Joe, still it had already become apparent that there was something very strange connected with him and why not this as well as any other?

Lately Eric had been reading Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and his mind was full of strange fancies concerning the awful change that was wont to come over that unfortunate being, who lived two lives, each unknown to the other.

It did not seem possible that Joe Leslie could be doing this exactly, but he might be carrying on two characters successfully.

At his business and his home up-town he was known as Joseph G. Leslie—on Twenty-seventh Street he might be Mr. Lester. To tear the mask away and expose the truth was what brought the detective here now.

In the interest of justice he was bound to do this much.

Then again he thought of Lillian.

In his indignation he wished she could be there to face her husband when his guilty secret was laid bare.

It might seem cruel—so does the hot iron of the doctor when applied to the marks left by the teeth of an enraged dog, but it is done with kindness—heroic treatment saves one from something more terrible beyond. Perhaps, if faced by Lillian, Joe would break down and receive a shock that would last him all the rest of his natural life.

So the detective made up his mind not to betray his presence now if he could help it, but reserve the *denouement* to a later date, when it could be made more dramatic.

All he meant to do now was to secure certain evidence for future use.

The stairs, being carpeted, gave forth no sound when he began ascending.

He felt rather peculiar about the whole business—had this man been a stranger he would not have experienced this same uneasiness; but Joe Leslie—to think that he should be upon the track of his old friend, and with such a purpose in view.

Once the stairs creaked under his weight and he stood still—the sound was preternaturally loud in an empty house; but there was no result, so that he presently continued his course of exploration.

Vehicles rumbled past the house—he could hear them plainly, as though some window were open near at hand.

Just as he reached the top of the stairs a cough reached his ears—it was a man who gave utterance to it, probably Joe.

No voices?

How singular!

Eric Darrell's wonder arose with each passing moment—strange to say, he was trembling all over now with excitement.

No living soul had ever seen this man in such a condition before, which fact went to prove how deep his interest was in the game he was now pursuing.

Not for worlds would he have stopped, now that his hand was on the plow.

The end must be near, and Joe's deep secret could not long remain such—it must be met and dragged to the light.

Darrell looked around him, since he was now at the head of the stairs.

The house seemed to be furnished throughout, and yet there seemed an air of desertion and loneliness about it, as though it lacked the daily care of a housekeeper—little things seemed to be lacking that would indicate the fact of its being a habitation that was occupied—where human beings lived and moved.

Somehow this fact impressed itself on the detective's mind.

He did not have much time for thought, as action was necessary.

When the brave soldier finds himself face to face with the enemy, he does not spend the minutes in reflection, but acts.

So with Eric—he had looked forward to this period for quite a time, and now that it had arrived, he was not the one to tarry

Where was Joe?

As nearly as he could place them the sounds had come from the front room.

He crept silently along in that direction—the door was open, and nothing prevented his seeing the interior of the apartment.

It was furnished, but did not contain a single occupant—light crept through the inside blinds, sufficient to show him this fact, and his wonder was simply increased to a fever heat.

In the name of heaven, what did all this strange mystery mean—where was Joe—what freak induced him to come here, and—

An odd, crackling sound reached his ears—ah! it proceeded from a small room used as a dressing-room, the door of which was closed.

Eric crept over to it and listened—all was as still as death within.

Baffled in this endeavor, he leaned against the door, pressing his ear close to the panel, to

catch any voices—if conspirators were gathered there they must talk—this silence could not be long maintained.

The door must have been on the latch—at any rate it was not fastened, and as Eric leaned against it this impediment to his vision slowly gave way, opening a foot or so, and Joe Leslie's terrible secret was revealed to the detective's eyes.

CHAPTER X

THAT MEERSCHAUM PIPE

In his time Eric Darrell had seen many strange sights, and experienced odd sensations; but the spectacle that now presented itself to his wondering eyes created a feeling within him such as had never yet come upon him.

He gaped in amazement, scarcely able to believe his senses.

To such a high pitch had his expectations been drawn that he looked for something of a startling nature.

The shock was tremendous, and yet it rather proceeded from a sudden revulsion of feeling, than because the scene exceeded his expectations.

There was but one occupant in the small apartment, upon the threshold of which he stood when the door gave way so unceremoniously.

This was Joe.

He was dressed differently than when Eric

had seen him enter the house, and seemed to have on an old suit of clothes, while a soft hat was drawn down upon his head.

He lay back in an easy chair, from which he started up in wonder and alarm as the door was thus burst open.

Darrell noted one thing.

In his hand Joe held a large meerschaum pipe and the white smoke was curling upward from the end of it in wreaths.

Before him was the conspirator, caught in the act, red-handed.

No wonder Joe turned fiery red.

The inside blind was closed, but the window appeared to be open.

Joe had a lamp lighted—doubtless the gas was turned off from the house, as it generally is from an empty or unoccupied building—and most men prefer to see when smoking.

Over Eric Darrell there swept a wave of feeling. All his old regard for this good-natured giant rushed back to him.

He held Joe's secret.

Thank heaven it was not more serious.

As for Joe himself, not recognizing the other, he sprang up in a belligerent way.

"Hello, here! What's wanted?" he demanded.

"Joe!"

"The deuce take it—who are you?" uneasily.

"Eric."

That was enough.

Leslie advanced, holding out his hand in a sort of hesitating, shamefaced way.

"Ah! old man, glad to see you, but I declare I didn't know you at first."

"Nor I you, Joe," calmly.

"That's so—I do look like a tramp, don't I?" with a glance at his own person.

"It wasn't that, but I was amazed at finding you engaged in such a business when you declared to me you had quit smoking."

Joe turned still redder in confusion.

"Darrell, you're mistaken—I've never told a living man that!" he cried.

"What! didn't you refuse my cigar?"

"Yes."

"And say—"

"I had quit smoking cigars at the request of my wife. Well, I have, and not a cigar has passed my lips since that day."

Eric burst out laughing.

"Ah! Joe, my boy, I see it all. You were

unable to keep to the letter of your promise and you have been maintaining this bachelor's hall ever since, where once a day you have crept in to have a good smoke."

"Eric, what you say is true—I am a slave to the weed, and I dare not confess it to my wife. She despises such slaves. My ears have tingled many a time at the sarcastic way in which she referred to such poor devils, at the same time thanking heaven that she had a husband with stamina enough to give up the vile habit when he became civilized."

Joe groaned and looked at his meerschaum pipe with a strange mixture of disgust and veneration.

He had a sympathetic auditor, for Eric was just as deep in the mud as he was in the mire, so far as smoking was concerned.

"What you say may be true, Joe, and yet it would be well for you to drop on your marrow-bones at once and confess all to your wife."

"Good heavens! do you mean it?"

"I do, indeed."

"But I can't—she will despise me. I had better make a determined effort to throw off this wretched habit, even if it kills me."

"You make a mistake in one thing, old man. I believe your wife, instead of reproaching you, will throw her arms around your neck and tell you to smoke after this when you please."

"Goodness gracious! why should she do this?"

"Because she will be so delighted to discover that it is no worse."

"No worse—it is as bad as it could be in her estimation. I shall feel like a criminal," and the good-natured giant shuddered.

He was not accustomed to deceit.

"Well, you mark my words—she will reproach you less than you believe."

"You speak in riddles—why should she be delighted to know it is no worse—why are you here—Heavens alive, man, has she employed you to watch me—does she already know I am engaged in this shameful deceit?"

He poured these questions out.

Already a light was beginning to shine before his eyes.

The detective smiled.

"Thank your stars, Joe Leslie, that when you face your sweet wife you have nothing more serious to confess than this fault."

"What did you suspect—what does she think?" he asked, almost breathlessly.

"That you were false to her."

"Darrell, I'd sooner be torn to pieces than be such a wretch," he declared, vehemently.

"I believe you now, Joe, but must confess that up to this very hour things looked black for you."

"How was that?"

"Circumstances were against you."

"Tell me all, Eric—everything."

The detective sees no reason why he should not. He believes in this man thoroughly now, and would trust him through everything.

So he begins and tells him all.

Joe's head rests upon his hand—the detective could not see his face, but he knew how it worked with feeling, and when he described how Lillian was dreadfully shocked when she heard of the *bal masque* and Joe's apparent presence there, he was not at all surprised to see a large tear drop upon the arm of the chair.

With tears in his eyes Joe looked up.

"Darrell, you ought to know me better than that. I am not that kind of a man. My whole life is wrapped up in my wife, and if I should lose her, either by death or any other means, it would kill me outright."

"I believe it, Joe, I do indeed."

Then he finished his story.

Joe was greatly wrought up.

"I shall go to Lillian at once—she shall hear the truth from my lips first, not yours. Perhaps she will forgive me. If she says the word I will break my pipe"—with a sort of sob—"and quit the whole infernal business if it kills me."

"I can arrange it so that she will beg you to smoke, Joe. Depend upon it, Lillian has learned that there are evils a thousand times worse than the one habit to which you are addicted."

"See here, Eric, you don't believe this thing of my being at the *bal masque*?"

"I do not, and yet just see how circumstantial evidence will hang a man. The chain of evidence was complete. You went out on an apparent quixotic errand; I saw a man with your figure escort a lady into that place; his name, singularly enough was Joe, and I heard some one say she was a Mrs. Lester or something of that kind, while I heard her tell the driver Twenty-seventh Street."

"Good heavens!" muttered poor Joe, appalled.

"Worse still, your wife showed me a picture of her sister, at my request. I pretended to be

interested and spoke of your joking me, and my promise to call when that sister came from California.

"To my horror I heard that man whom I supposed to be you, call that dark-haired lady at the masquerade by that name."

"Marian?"

"Yes. You can imagine the awful feelings it aroused within me; the whole thing seemed so plain that I was appalled. Joe Leslie dropped from the high place he held in my esteem and at that time I almost hated you."

"I don't wonder at it, old fellow, and think all the more of you for it."

"Later on I became vacillating—several things occurred that broke me up completely, among others the statement made by your driver."

"How was that?"

"He declared you were down town all the evening and to prove it stated that he had talked with an officer I know just at midnight."

"Yes, I remember."

"I proved this true, and that aroused my suspicions for the first time. If you were down town you could not be at the *bal masque* at the same minute—for it was a few minutes before

midnight that the melee occurred and the man I thought to be you floored his assailants."

"I see I must hunt up this Joe Lester and discover who and what he is. Perhaps we have been playing the two Dromios again."

Joe had knocked the ashes from his pipe and locked the treasure up in a closet in the larger front room, where his clothes were hanging.

The artful villain was wont to change his garments when he entered here, in order that he might not go home saturated with tobacco smoke.

Eric saw the whole thing plainly.

He felt in exuberant spirits.

So far as Joe was concerned, the whole business had turned out delightfully.

Just then the detective's mind did not turn in any other direction.

He forgot all about the other side of the case, and seemed to consider the matter settled.

Peace would again come upon the disturbed family relations of his friend Joe, and all be as lovely as of yore.

Of course Lillian would be only too glad to close up the matter by forgiving her husband.

His sin was not a grievous one, and so great would be her relief at finding him faithful and true that she would gladly forget it all.

Under these circumstances Darrell watched Joe get into his clothes with sincere satisfaction.

He had never been more worried over anything than he was with this, and now that it had all turned out so well, he felt a satisfaction that seemed to permeate his whole system.

When Joe had dressed himself, he seemed to have made up his mind about a certain thing.

Taking the beloved meerschaum pipe out of the closet, he laid it in a case and tucked the whole under his arm.

"What's that for?" asked Eric.

"She shall smash it to pieces—I cannot."

"Well, I don't believe Lillian ever will. Make a clean breast of it, old fellow."

"I intend to."

"Then you are safe—she is too gentle not to forgive, and I expect to see you soon smoking a cigar on the street like other men."

"No, no, I can't do that—I would feel like a wretch to ever do that."

"Mark my words, she will insist on it—her scruples must vanish, and I expect she will really enjoy the flavor of a fine cigar soon, when her Joe is at the other end of it."

Joe smiled dismally—he realized that he had

business before him that would try his nerves, for as a man he had pride and must now humble himself before the woman he loved! But his mind was made up, and he actually felt already as though a load had been taken from his shoulders—just as the prodigal son, as soon as he decided to return to his father, experienced a new feeling of peace.

They left the house and parted at the elevated station, one going up the other down town.

As he reached the platform, the detective suddenly felt a cold shiver go over him at sight of a man.

It was Paul Prescott, the artist.

There rushed over Eric the memory of that other half of the mystery, and he groaned—this time his sympathy was with Joe and not his wife.

CHAPTER XI

ALL IS FORGIVEN

Joe Leslie never felt so mean in all his life as when he approached his house up town on this evening.

He knew he had been playing a miserable part in deceiving his wife with regard to his smoking, but subterfuge was something generally foreign to Joe's nature, and this made it seem all the worse to him.

Still, he did not sneak along in a cringing way. Never had he walked more uprightly—for he could look people in the face now, at least, and was determined to make a clean breast of it.

Lillian was watching from the parlor window, herself hidden from view.

She thought she had never seen Joe looked so manly, as when he walked up to the house, and her heart seemed cold to think that it may have been the smiles of some rival that brought this look of pleasure to his face.

Thus a man may feel mean, and at the same time appear joyous.

When Joe entered the house he saw a light back in the library.

Straight in that direction he walked.

Lillian was seated there apparently reading—how was he to know she had hastily flown hither from her lookout?

Joe softly closed the door. Another minute and he stood before his wife.

"Lillian, my wife, look up."

Somewhat startled, she did so.

"Why, Joe!"

"I want you to know what a base man you have for a husband, Lillian."

"You mean—" she gasped.

"That I have a confession to make, and I am determined to make it now."

"A confession, Joseph—" and the little woman gained her feet.

Her face was white with a sudden fear—she even believed Joe was about to tell her some terrible truth—that he had never loved her—perhaps had been married ere he knew her.

At any rate she was dreadfully alarmed.

"Yes, I have been a villain to treat the best

little woman in all the world so, but this old love was with me long before I knew you—it had become a part of my very life. I never knew how strong it was until lately. God knows I have tried to shake it off, and be faithful to my promise, but I am weak. I have sinned, Lillian, my wife, and I stand here humbly to ask if you can ever forgive me.”

He stood there with bowed head, proud even in his humility.

“But oh, Joe, to think—that woman—” and she burst into a torrent of tears.

He seized her hands and took them down from her face.

“Good heavens, Lillian, I forgot that you believed that. It is no woman—I have never been unfaithful to you in word or deed—that was not I whom Darrell saw at the *bal masque* last night, dear. I am yours, wretched man that I am, but yours alone, always.”

“But what—I don’t understand—you say you have sinned and yet that you are innocent. Oh, Joe, please tell me everything.”

“I would be a base wretch if I did not. Do you remember making me give a promise before we were married, Lillian?”

"Not about your cigars, Joe?"

"That's it," eagerly; "and for a time I suffered terrible torments in keeping it to the letter; but after a while the devil tempted me. He said, 'You promised to give up cigars—nothing was said about your pipe.' Lillian, like a weak fool I gave in, and daily almost, for months, I have gone to the house I own in Twenty-seventh Street, changed my clothes and enjoyed half an hour's smoke.

"It was a cruel deception on you, and I have felt like a sneak in doing it. Thanks to Darrell my eyes have been opened and I am here to confess all, asking forgiveness."

Lillian could hardly believe her ears—she turned a face illumined upon her husband.

"Joe, dear Joe, is this your dreadful secret?"

"It is," solemnly.

"You are sure you have told me everything?"

"There is not another thing I have ever kept from you, my darling."

"And you love no one else?"

"Not a living soul but my wife."

"Oh! I am so glad."

With these words she flew into his arms, and Joe, bending down, gravely kissed his own.

"You are sure you can forgive me, dearest?"

"Forgive you—oh, Joe, I shall *love* tobacco after this."

"See, I have brought my pipe here for you to destroy—I couldn't quite do it myself, for I've had it many years. But you shall be the executioner."

"Not for worlds—if this is the only rival I have to fear I can share my place in your heart with it. You shall smoke after dinner, and I myself will fill your pipe."

He kissed her fingers tenderly.

"Ah! dearest, what a fool I have been all this while, to suffer as I have when by confession I might have long since been absolved. But I am sincere in my resolve to stop smoking."

"And I am just as firmly resolved that you shall not. I am cured of my folly. But for that foolish prejudice you would never have been led to deceive me."

They held sweet communion for some little time, and all seemed as lovely as during the bright days of their courtship.

Then the dinner bell rang.

Together they went down, Joe's arm around his wife, as though they were lovers.

After the meal was over they again sought the library, and chatted.

"Now for your pipe, Joe, dear," said Lillian. He protested.

It was of no avail—she was determined that he had suffered enough—better love with a cigar in the house than the absence of both.

Few men will condemn Joe's weakness.

In other respects he could be adamant, but he owned up to being very fond of a smoke.

So Lillian took his bag of tobacco out of the case which also held the pipe, filled the bowl and brought it to him.

He kissed her on the spot—what else could he do?

"A match, please, dear, since you insist upon it—I am out of them."

"And the holder is also empty—stay, here is a scrap of paper that will do."

She took a piece out of the waste basket and, without looking at it, twisted a lighter.

This she held in the gas jet, and, lighted, brought it over to Joe, who calmly laid it on his pipe, puffed a few times, and then, blowing out the flame, knocked the red ashes off the lighter, laying it on the table for possible use again.

Then he eyed his wife quizzically.

She was looking at him with a smile.

"I feel like a brute, Lillian, to inflict such a torment upon you. Say the word, and the whole thing goes forever."

"Not I," she replied; "I never knew how fragrant the odor was. If you must smoke, my husband, you shall do it as other gentlemen do, in your own home, but always smoke the best cigars and few of them."

This was charming, Joe thought.

He had not been so happy for months.

It often happens that the skies are clearest just before the worst of storms.

Joe saw no cloud on the horizon.

All the same it was there, and ready to blot out the sunshine like magic.

It came about in a peculiar way.

Lillian had settled down to read a book she was interested in, and Joe had his paper.

While he read he mechanically fingered the lighter with the charred end, and untwisted it.

Finally he looked over his paper at his wife and mused.

How good she was to make his penance so light and how happy he ought to be in the possession of such a dear little woman.

Evidently Joe had forgotten something.

He found his pipe had gone out during his musing, and taking hold of the paper she had twisted for him, was about to make a lighter out of it again, when he received what seemed to be an electric shock.

A name had caught his eye on the paper.

He held it up closer.

Yes, there could be no mistake—it was a note his wife had twisted up—by some mistake it had come into his waste basket.

What was left of it after the burning he read:

“if you can contrive to conceal it from your husband until then, all will be well. I think I can rely upon your discretion—everything goes on well, and our secret is, I believe, safe.

“Faithfully yours,

“PAUL PRESCOTT.”

When poor Joe had taken this in he felt as though he had been plunged into an icy bath.

The joyous spirit of contentment that had pervaded his whole being was gone.

Suspicion, jealousy, unrest, came trooping in with renewed force.

His own late experience should have been a lesson to him, but it was not.

The first thing he did was to fold the paper up and put it in his pocket.

Why he did this he often wondered later on, when the right course would have been to have handed it to Lillian for explanation.

He looked at his paper again, but did not see that he had it upside down.

Thought was busy.

He was trying to convince himself that it was none of his business anyhow—that he had had his secret and why not Lillian.

Then again he remembered that she was his wife—what concerned her concerned him.

At any rate Joe's sudden happiness was overcast—clouds had covered the sky.

He began to feel miserable.

As it was not his design that Lillian should see this, he assumed a cheerfulness he was far from feeling.

The evening passed.

Joe wished to get in a closet at one end of the room, but found it locked.

"I wonder where the key of this door is. I'm sure I didn't take it."

Accidentally he chanced to look toward Lillian while speaking, and was almost startled to see the color fly into her face.

"I believe I left it up-stairs, Joe. If you really want it I might go up and see if I can get it."

"Oh! no, dear, it doesn't matter. Another time will do as well," he said carelessly.

At the same time, for the life of him he could not help associating her action with the letter received from Paul Prescott.

It worried him.

He was diverted from this state by Lillian, who asked about the clerk, so Joe told all that had been done the night before—he had spoken of it ere now, but had not given particulars.

Woman-like she was interested, and declared she loved him better because of the mercy he had shown for the boy.

Then Lillian retired.

Joe sat there a long time thinking.

Finally he got up and went over to the closet as if to effect an entrance, trying several of the keys on his bunch but with no success.

Then he walked up and down.

At times he was dejected and again his face seemed to speak of sudden passion.

Human nature is a strange thing.

A man enters an omnibus and frowns to hear

the growls of those comfortably settled as they make room for him—presently another comes in, and his growls at being forced to squeeze into a smaller compass exceed the rest.

Joe, upstairs, discovered the missing key on the dainty dresser of his wife's room—he took it in his hand, started for the door, stopped, made an impatient gesture, and returned the key to the place where he found it.

"Suspect her—never," he muttered, and yet at the very moment his feelings had gotten beyond his control—it was pride that kept him from venturing to pry into her secret and discover what lay hidden in the library closet.

Thus Joe had won and lost a victory.

CHAPTER XII

THE OPIUM JOINT

Eric Darrell watched the man whom he had thus met on the platform of the elevated station. He wondered what magical power Paul Prescott possessed over Joe Leslie's wife.

The man was odd looking, as a genius is ever supposed to be, but there was nothing about him to indicate that he might be a masher or a heart-breaker.

Darrell looked him over, taking a mental measurement of the man, as he had a dim idea the time might be near at hand when they would be on opposite sides.

The other left the train. Darrell followed him.

Presently he saw a woman join the artist and hand him a note, which he seemed to read with great eagerness, then he hurried off.

The keen eyes of the detective had noted something of extreme importance.

When Prescott believed he put the note away in his pocket, in reality it fluttered down to the pavement as he hastened away.

In just five seconds by the watch it was in the possession of Eric Darrell.

He then continued on his way to his rooms.

Reaching his den he changed his appearance, and appeared in his natural figure. Then he took out the paper just found and eagerly scrutinized it; not that he was particularly interested in the secrets of Paul Prescott, but the artist had crossed his path, and hence all that he did should be scrutinized.

As he suspected, the writing was in a lady's chirography—so many ladies write alike, as though taught by a certain school, that individuality is lost.

This is what the detective read, and it opened his eyes in an astonishing manner:

"My beloved Paul—I consent at last to your proposition—in flight alone we can be safe. I shall be ready when you come to take me. *He* will be like a tiger let loose—I know his passion. I believe he would have killed me ere now had he suspected our secret. Carry out your plan—I understand, and am willing to fly from an uncongenial home to the one you will make for me. With love, your own L."

That was all. Heaven knows it was enough.

Darrell let the paper drop on the table with a sharp cry of pain.

"Poor Joe! poor honest old Joe! You thought you were deceiving your wife past forgiveness because you chose to smoke a pipe in secret, and here she conspires to leave you in the lurch. Joe is the ogre referred to, savage as a tiger. Woman—well, I'll be hanged if I want to know her sister after all. I never was so deceived in all my life. It is a shame—an accursed shame, and that villain shall pay dearly for it all."

Then he examined the note again, endeavoring to read between the lines.

His indignation grew apace.

Joe had proven himself pure gold, and he had more confidence in him than ever, but there was something here that needed investigation, and the case looked black for Lillian.

The note was signed with an L.

However, Darrell, always cautious, was not ready to condemn without a hearing—what he had already seen this night taught him the fallacy of circumstantial evidence.

First of all he must secure a scrap of Mrs. Leslie's handwriting and compare it with that **which** he held in his hand.

That could be done in the morning he had no doubt—it would not prove a formidable task to one of his executive ability.

There was an ugly look about the business he did not like, and he was anxious to be at the truth.

About eight o'clock, having had his supper, and made certain inquiries that put him into possession of facts he desired to know, Darrell found himself watching for Paul Prescott at the lodgings of the artist.

It was the desire of the detective to acquaint himself with some of the customs of the man whom he meant to investigate.

This was always his plan when engaged in such a business—he found it paid to size a man up and see what his habits were.

When a man was suspected of being a forger, or a check raiser, or a defaulter, Darrell's very first action was to discover who his usual companions were, where he passed his leisure time, and whether he was addicted to little vices. His secret character always told the story.

A young man might be a Sunday-school teacher, and apparently as straight as a die to all outward appearances, but if Darrell on track-

ing him found that he secretly frequented gambling houses he knew he had his man.

What does it avail if the outside of the peach is fair to gaze upon when all is rotten below?

So he now desired to learn what this peculiar looking artist really was.

He had a good reputation among people generally, but then this counted as little.

Much dross might be taken for pure gold did not the assayer apply his tests.

That was what Darrell did—looked into each man's private character, unknown to the individual under the scrutiny.

He seemed to take it for granted that the artist would come out, and in this he appeared to make no mistake. Sure enough Prescott appeared.

He was evidently off for the evening, but did not dress as though he meant to spend it in fashionable society.

Darrell followed him to a certain club where artists were wont to congregate, and here the other seemed quite a favorite.

At half-past eleven Prescott left this place. He did not head toward home.

On the contrary he seemed ill at ease, and

looked around him once or twice as though he were afraid lest some of his fellows at the club should be near.

This action in itself was suspicious to Eric—it indicated that the artist had certain habits which he desired to keep a secret even from those who would have thought the least of it.

Darrell's curiosity was at once aroused.

He realized that now the game would probably be worth the hunting.

At any rate, since the opportunity was now given him, he was determined to learn more about the artist than he had known before.

Paul Prescott headed down town, boarding a Third Avenue street car near Fourteenth Street. On the same car, out in front, stood Eric, enjoying the bracing night air.

He could see without being seen, and managed to keep an eye on the artist. When he saw the other finally rise he knew he was about to leave the car, and the detective forestalled him.

Once on the pavement he waited for his man and then shadowed him.

Darrell was not greatly surprised at what he learned—the place he entered was an opium joint, kept by a Chinaman and an American in

partnership, probably the largest about town. Here a good class of customers were wont to resort, and among others several actors, a doctor, a well known jurist, a writer, together with several women, whose attire and jewelry proved them to belong to the upper circle.

Many a man's history received a downward impetus dating from the hour he first entered this den of iniquity.

Darrell knew it well.

He had been in it a number of times in the course of the last year—those whom he hunted had come here.

A clerk had robbed his employer for money to pay the opium fiend—once the habit gains full sway and the victim will do anything on earth in order to get money to pay for a few pipes and an hour of the peculiar drunken fancy.

Knowing the ropes was of assistance to the detective now.

He went in, and assuming the eager, trembling manner of an habitue demanded a bunk and a pipe. All the while he used his eyes.

The room was supplied with lounges and settees—the usual bunks were in another apartment where the Chinese and cheaper grade of

smokers could indulge their pet vice for a smaller sum.

This place was furnished with something of Oriental splendor, and the detective could not but admire the barbaric taste of the proprietor.

The couches spread around were soft and inviting, Turkish in their make—some had curtains partly drawn, so that the occupant was half screened.

Three of these were occupied by women.

This was no uncommon sight.

That two of them wore veils was evidence that they had not yet been hardened by the drug; but all this would come in time.

The third had thrown her veil back, and her set face could be seen, the eyes staring into vacancy, as though sightless.

Wretched sinners that they were, drawn onward by the inexorable god at whose altar they worshiped, there was no escape for them—just ahead lay the black gulf of despair, toward which they were hurrying so rapidly, and soon it must close over them.

Then—eternity!

Darrell never entered here without a feeling of commiseration for the poor souls thus linked with the skeleton arms of death.

Had the opportunity ever offered he would gladly have tried to save one or more of them; but he was well aware what a difficult and well nigh impossible task it is to endeavor to save a man against himself.

Luckily Eric possessed a peculiar disposition—what little opium he smoked had no effect on him, and he had no longing for the drug as the generality have.

On the contrary it almost nauseated him, and he could only have become an habitual opium fiend by long and persistent practice.

He glanced around to see where the artist had deposited his frame, and discovered Prescott on the couch next the second veiled lady.

Whether this was accident or design the detective was unable to decide as yet, but he had an idea and steadily nursed it.

His feeling of mingled disgust and pity was greatest for these women—he knew the one whose face he saw was a well-to-do widow up on Lexington Avenue, and perhaps the others were friends who had come here first in a spirit of bravado and daring curiosity, perhaps upon a wager, and whom the fascination of the drug had already chained to the chariot wheels of

the ogre Opium. Those wheels revolved slowly but remorselessly—sooner or later they would crush out the life of all who clung to them.

Had Prescott anything in common with this rich and brazen widow and her friends?

That he knew the former Darrell had already guessed, for her set expression had momentarily changed at sight of the man, and the detective caught a look of deep cunning, which was returned with a smile and a nod from the man.

Eager to learn all he could of the artist's private character, the detective determined to watch for all he was worth.

He was also ready to find out who the two veiled women were, who set aside all modesty and came to this public opium joint because they could not properly prepare and enjoy the drug at their homes.

At a certain hour no doubt a closed carriage would be waiting to convey them all home—perhaps the dashing widow had some male friend present who would serve as an escort.

Prescott received his pipe, prepared his pill and was soon smoking quietly.

Silence rested upon the place—people came not here to converse, but to dream with open

eyes, seeing the beautiful things that danced before their eyes like a bright *ignis fatuus*, always eluding their grasp, yet luring them deeper and deeper into the toils.

CHAPTER XIII

A TERRIBLE DOOM

Before Eric Darrell had been in the place ten minutes he made a discovery that had a strong bearing on the case.

This was in reference to the artist.

Paul Prescott had shown all the signs of an opium smoker's eagerness to have a draw at the subtle drug when he came in.

Nevertheless, Eric had already decided that much of this was assumed.

His own experience showed how such a thing could be; hence, he believed another might copy the same signs of distress with equal success.

Then Prescott had a reason for coming here other than the desire to smoke.

What could it be?

Darrell had eyes, and he was able to form conclusions very speedily.

He knew that the presence of the dark-veiled woman in the bunk adjoining that taken by the artist, was what had drawn him.

Circumstances pointed to this fact—their heads were close together, one resting upon the right, the other upon the left side.

The detective's thoughts were busy.

He remembered the note.

Could this veiled creature be the party signing that missive?

According to the conclusions he had already drawn this could not be so, for he had made up his mind that the writer must be Lillian, and only waited to prove this fact.

Who then was the veiled lady?

Bah! such a man as Paul Prescott might be engaged in half a dozen little love affairs at one and the same time.

He would finally abandon all the rest for the charmer who held his fickle heart most heavily chained, or else whose bank account was the most promising.

To a man of Darrell's steadiness of purpose, there was something almost revolting about such a character as this, and yet he found certain things to study in the artist's face—points that rather puzzled him when scrutinized.

The man was worthy of being analyzed.

There might be more to him than even appeared upon the surface.

Darrell was wide awake, although he pretended to be already under the magic influence.

He was soothed by the odor of the opium, without giving way to it, and watched the couple across the way.

The hanging curtains partly concealed him, and he was sure a note passed from one to the other. If the girl thus heavily veiled was in the charge of the widow, the latter did not seem in a condition to watch over her ward, for she had given herself up wholly to her dreams.

In the silence of this den of human misery, where each victim was bound to his neighbor by the same chains that made him a slave, a long stride was taken on this night toward the oblivion of death.

Strange scenes sometimes occur in these places, and one was on the tapis for this night.

So interested had the detective been in watching the couple opposite, that he seldom glanced at any of the others.

By mere chance his eyes alighted upon the second veiled woman, and at the same moment he saw that something was wrong.

She had swept her veil aside, and the light revealed a face at once handsome and dissipated—she had been a beauty earlier in life.

Just now this face was distorted. Pain racked it.

Eric Darrell saw the awful hand of death there—he knew the wretched woman must have some heart trouble which was aggravated by the opium, and that she was dying.

He beckoned to the Yankee who represented the American side of the firm.

Then he pointed to the struggling woman.

The other sprang to her.

There was a gasp and all was over—death had come to her in the opium den.

By this time Eric was out on the floor, and it was well he happened to be there, for the man showed the white feather at once, fearing lest a thing of this kind would ruin his business.

Luckily a strong hand was at the helm.

The orders Eric gave were obeyed—no one was allowed to leave the place.

Most of those present manifested no interest in the game—their minds were wholly taken up with heavenly visions—death might come and go without their notice.

Eric knew what must be done.

The woman was elegantly dressed—she was no doubt the wife of a wealthy citizen, and if it

were known that she had expired in this fashionable opium joint the shame would be terrible.

He aroused the widow.

The other veiled lady was trembling, having gained her feet, but she would answer no questions, only sob and wring her hands, while the artist pretended not to notice any one, though eagerly taking it all in.

When the dashing widow was brought out of her dreams and made to realize the truth, she too seemed overwhelmed.

Eric took hold of her.

His strong mind controlled hers, and he soon made her see how essential it was that this awful business be kept a dead secret.

She must confide in him, giving the name and address of the deceased—he would then see that the body was taken there unknown to a living soul save the driver, and the secret would be locked in the breast of her husband.

The world she moved in would attend her funeral, and never dream that she had died in any other place than at home.

This gave the widow hope.

She whispered the lady's name and residence to the detective, who wrote them down.

He was surprised to discover that her husband was a prominent business man down town.

It was an awful business, but he managed it with great circumspection—the body was placed in a hack, and the driver did not know but what she was merely sick.

Eric had also discovered the name and address of the other veiled lady—the widow had given it upon his assurance of good faith. It was Mrs. Collingwood. Her address was Lexington Avenue.

Darrell's actions were right to the point in a business light.

His main desire was to save the poor husband all the shame and mortification possible.

Leaving the hack at the curb he was presently in the presence of the gentleman, to whom he broke the awful news as gently as possible.

At first the other was dreadfully shocked, but upon learning what bold measures the detective had taken to conceal the actual facts, he overwhelmed the other with thanks.

Between them they got the body into the house, Darrell speaking to the supposed sick lady in a reassuring way.

The driver was heavily fed and cautioned to

hold his tongue under any and all circumstances.

Darrell assisted the stricken husband to get his dead up into her room.

Then in the library he heard the full particulars from the detective.

Afterwards, he insisted on telling his story—how his once lovely and affectionate wife had secretly taken to the deadly drug from injections given to make her sleep during a spell of sickness. The harrowing tale has been often repeated in such a city as New York—her power of resistance became less and less strong, until he could do nothing with her.

Knowing that she had heart trouble he had been expecting such a catastrophe, but nevertheless it had fallen with crushing force.

He was greatly indebted to the detective for his assistance—it was possible that the real facts might be covered up, and with the help of his family physician the death be given as simply one from heart disease.

When Eric felt the gentleman's grasp at parting, and saw the tears upon his sad face, he knew that his visit to the opium joint had not been without its reward, since he was enabled to bring deep satisfaction to this soul long

harrowed by the fear of such a catastrophe.

Meanwhile, he had the address of the veiled woman with whom the artist had been in communication at the opium joint.

At his leisure on the morrow he could look her up and learn all there was connected with his case.

Such a scene as the one thus briefly described has occurred at an opium den in the great metropolis—who the ill-fated lady was no one knew, at least the facts were never made public, and only a few guessed the truth by watching the death column in the dailies.

The opium habit gains strength slowly in our midst, but there are more people slaves to the vice than the public suspects.

Knowing the joint would in all probability be closed for the remainder of the night, Eric made no attempt to go there but sought his apartments to rest.

The committee appointed to examine into the strange case of Leslie vs. Leslie could report progress.

On the morrow the work would be resumed, and a long stride taken toward the end.

This man had a wonderful power over his

mind, and could control it at will. When he was ready to sleep he dismissed all thought and secured solid rest, so that when he woke up his mind was as clear as a bell. To such a fact he owed much of his success.

With the morning he was up and out.

It was a fair day, and Eric hoped he might look upon this as an emblem of luck—that his case might prove as clear.

His first thought was to get some specimen of Mrs. Leslie's writing.

To do this he must visit the house but waited until Joe would probably be on his way down to his business.

Then he went to the dwelling up town.

He asked to see Mrs. Leslie and was shown in.

Being left alone for a short time he glanced around as if in hope of seeing an opportunity to carry out his design.

A desk caught his eye—if he only had the opportunity to look through it he felt sure he could find what he wanted, for it was undoubtedly the property of Lillian Leslie.

There were several books on the library table. These he examined hastily.

He hoped to find one that Lillian might have

written her name in, for he believed that it would be easy to compare the writing and pronounce sentence from that.

In this, however, he was disappointed.

Joe's name was in several, the books being inscribed, with love, to his wife. This only proved his great love.

Eric was ready to swear by it now, and did not mean to let the case drop until he had sifted it thoroughly—such honest affection as Joe's should never be made sport of in a friend of his, even by the prettiest witch that ever trod the earth—at least not with his approval.

The rustle of female attire drew his attention, and, turning, he found himself face to face with the lady of the house.

He had not sent up his name and she appeared quite surprised at seeing who it was.

"You, Mr. Darrell?"

"At your service, Mrs. Leslie."

"What do you wish this morning, sir?"

There was something of coldness in her tones.

He could not tell whence it sprung, as there were several things that might cause it.

Perhaps she felt humiliated in his presence because she had let him see her weakness, jealousy of her husband's affection.

Then, again, if she were guilty she might fear him because he was a detective and Joe's friend.

He suspended judgment and resolved to study this fair creature more closely than he had as yet had a chance to do.

CHAPTER XIV

ANOTHER LINK IN THE CHAIN

All these things had flashed through Darrell's mind with a rapidity that lightning alone could equal, for there is nothing more rapid than thought.

He maintained his suave manner.

"I have come this morning, Mrs. Leslie, for several things. In the first place I wish to congratulate you on the fact that Joe's terrible secret, as I made it out, was after all so simple a thing. Your wifely trust and devotion had their reward and I can appreciate the feeling of satisfaction you now possess because of your trust which I could not wholly beat down, in spite of the proofs I brought, and which must have appeared 'strong as holy writ'."

This was artful of Eric—he thought to destroy the barrier by a little flattery, knowing all the while that Lillian had really been jealous.

It told too.

The fair lady smiled upon him once more.

"I am happy because our bugaboo turned out to be only a pipe, and Joe has gone off this morning with a cigar—he shall smoke when he pleases after this."

"And you?"

"I find that the odor from a good cigar is rather attractive. At any rate, Joe has done so much for me that I can afford to give in to one little vice of his. To think of the poor dear fellow hiding himself away like that. It makes me almost cry to think how miserably cruel I have been to him. But I mean to make it up to Joe in the future, Mr. Darrell."

Eric swallowed a lump that seemed to be sticking in his throat.

This, the woman whom he suspected of being false to her husband—he did not know how it was, but whenever he came into her presence he seemed to be in some way charmed.

She was a siren.

The same power, exercised by the nymphs of the sea in olden days, causing the sailors to jump over to their death, is given to certain of the gentler sex to-day.

Adam sunk all his manhood and forgot his

duty to his Maker when tempted by Eve, and from that day to this few men there are strong enough to do the right when a beautiful woman smiles upon them and teaches them the lesson of love.

It would be impossible to describe the influence Lillian had upon nearly all who came in contact with her—her manner was soothing and pleasant, so that general admiration followed her acquaintance.

Darrell was a man of strong purposes and he put down with a firm hand any feeling that interfered with his stern sense of duty.

In a business way he was here to see whether Lillian was what she appeared to be, or deceptive by nature.

Hence he was not to be charmed from his purpose in any way.

The human feeling of admiration must give way to the professional energy.

"You spoke of several reasons for calling to see me, Mr. Darrell—will you kindly state what the others are?" she asked.

"With pleasure, and I trust you will not feel offended, my dear Mrs. Leslie. It is a custom on my part in a case like this, to take from the

party with whom I have been engaged, a little note, stating that they have been well satisfied with my services. I hope you may not think it out of the way and give me this."

She appeared troubled.

"I do not know that I ought to—such an affair is essentially private."

"I only desire the paper for my own satisfaction, and not to show. You can merely state that you are entirely satisfied with the services of Eric Darrell, and if you prefer, simply sign your initials."

Crafty man—the initial was what he wanted above all else.

Her face brightened.

"I do not know that I would object to that, Mr. Darrell, since my identity is concealed. Do you want it now?"

"If you please," humbly, but secretly exulting over his success.

She went to the desk, opened it and sat down—after a minute's thought she wrote something upon a sheet of paper.

"Will that do, Mr. Darrell?" handing it to him.

He glanced at it and read:

"This is to certify that Mr. Eric Darrell has accomplished the work for which I have employed him, in a thoroughly satisfactory manner, and that I am well satisfied with his services. L. L.

"New York, October 7, 188—"

Darrell smiled.

"A thousand thanks, madam."

"It answers your purpose?" quietly.

"Yes, yes."

Although he smiled Eric Darrell felt as though he could have wept just then.

The one glance he had taken had revealed the fact that the capital L made by Mrs. Leslie was very similar to the one which he had seen signed to the note Paul Prescott had let fall.

It was a shock to the detective, even though he had in a measure expected it.

That point gained he put the matter aside for the present and continued to appear pleasant, though it was only with an effort he could do so.

For a little he chatted with the lady, and endeavored to study her.

Darrell thought that if his suspicions were proven true, Lillian Leslie must be the perfection of an actress—he had never seen two such

extremes meet in an individual—she was the incarnation of good and evil.

“By the way, are you acquainted with a Mrs. Collingwood of your street here?” he asked after a while, in a careless tone.

“Yes, I know her.”

She looked surprised, as though wondering where he could have met her.

“Last night I made her acquaintance. She is accounted a rather handsome woman, I believe.”

This was put out as a sort of feeler, for he had not even seen her face.

Lillian answered in a manner that declared what little interest she had in the lady:

“I believe so, but we were never friends, and I do not know much about the lady.”

That ended it.

Darrell soon took his leave, having gained the point for which he had come.

When he entered a car on the elevated road he found a corner to himself, and then, unable to wait longer, proceeded to compare the two notes.

Just as he thought, the writing was of the same order, and there was much resemblance in the capital letters.

Still, Eric had seen enough to know that only an expert could decide this question beyond all cavil.

Before now he had seen the chirography of two persons resemble each other, and this was not to be accepted as conclusive evidence.

At the same time it was a point that would bear upon the final result.

He kept it in mind.

Other threads must now be taken up in turn, until the main current was reached which would sweep him on to the sea.

He put away the document just received from Mrs. Leslie.

While still looking at the other, some one sat down beside him.

Darrell's thoughts were fixed upon the subject which occupied his attention, and he did not even know there was some one in the next seat until a hand clutched his arm.

"Where did you get that paper?" said a hoarse voice close by his ear.

Turning his head at this he was surprised to see Paul Prescott beside him.

Fortune plays some queer tricks at times, and this was one of them.

What an odd chance that this man, of all in the great city, should sit down in the same car, at the very moment Darrell had that fatal paper in his hand.

The circumstances were indeed so singular that Eric could not but start; but his excellent control over his nerves stood him in good stead again.

He looked in the artist's face—it was flushed and eager and angry—evidently he had not missed the letter up to now.

“My dear sir, does it belong to you?” asked the detective, quietly.

“It does, sir.”

“Then take your property.”

“Very good, sir; but I have a right to ask, yes, demand of you, to explain under what peculiar circumstances this document chanced to come into your possession.”

“I do not question your right to ask that, and I shall readily tell where and when I picked the letter up.”

So he gave the time and place to a dot, but did not say anything about having seen it drop from the pocket of the owner. Prescott remembered that this was when and where he had

received the message, and he had no doubt of the truth of the story.

At the same time he looked at the man by his side with a frown.

"You read this?" he asked.

"Naturally so—you could not blame me."

"And had your curiosity aroused?"

"Well, yes, but that has nothing to do with it. Let us forget the circumstance."

"Willingly, since it concerns the private affairs of a very dear friend."

No more was said.

Eric read his paper and the artist seemed occupied with his, but every now and then he turned his eyes toward the detective as though his curiosity was aroused.

When the artist arose at Fourteenth Street, to leave the car, Eric handed him a card he had, prepared for such occasions.

It gave his name and the address of his apartments—nothing more.

"If you should ever desire to see me, sir, you will find me there by letter or person," he said quietly.

At this Prescott smiled broadly.

"I hope you don't think I dream of sending

you a challenge for finding my letter," he said.

"Well, you looked as black as a thunder cloud, and I didn't know but what you might be meditating something of the sort."

"It was rude in me to act that way, and I beg your pardon for it."

Frankly said.

The detective liked him better for it, and there was something about the other's face quite attractive after all.

Somehow Eric did not seem to hate and despise him as he had done before.

When the artist had gone he fell into a fit of musing again.

Various theories were built up, only to be discarded again as unequal to the occasion.

He remembered that the letter had been given to Prescott by a woman, who was evidently in the pay of the party signed L.

Whom could Lillian send?

He did not know the internal arrangements of the lovely little house up town, and this was what was now on his mind.

The office of Joe Leslie was his destination, and he made his way thither after leaving the elevated road.

Leslie was in John Street, and carried on a business in precious stones, of which he was one of the best judges in the city.

He was a man of considerable wealth, but being of an unostentatious nature he did not put on much style, preferring to live quietly and well.

When Eric Darrell ascended the stairs of the large building in which his friend had his offices, he was forcibly reminded of times gone by when Joe was a bachelor, and the two had been warm friends, passing through numerous scenes of pleasure in company.

CHAPTER XV

COMPARING NOTES

Joe was in.

When the detective sent his card by the same clerk whom he had helped Joe rescue from the clutches of the gamblers, he was shown to the private office.

Here he found his friend seated at his desk, and busily engaged with a pile of letters that had come in the morning mail.

Joe greeted him cordially and begged him to wait a few minutes, when he would be through with his task.

This suited the detective exactly, since it gave him a chance to watch the other.

He was able to read a face pretty thoroughly and he saw very quickly that Joe was still greatly troubled in his mind.

He had gotten rid of one burden, but another had come in its stead.

What could it mean?

There was little need for Eric to ask that.

He knew, beyond all doubt, that the old suspicions had arisen again in Joe's mind, perhaps strengthened by some circumstance.

Finally Joe leaned back in his chair and looked at his visitor.

"Eric, for a short time last night I was really and truly happy—it seemed to me that the clouds had all rolled by. Then, by a strange circumstance, they were brought forward again and now I am worse off than ever."

"That is too bad—I am sorry for it."

"Before, it was my foolish habit that gave me sorrow—now it is a dreadful thought that I endeavor to banish from my mind, but which rises up again and again in all its hideous deformity until I almost feel as though I am mad.

"Still I keep my thoughts clear, for I know that this awful question must be grappled with, and fought to the death.

"My whole future is concerned in it, and I mean to lay the ghost forever, or else know the very worst."

"Spoken like a true man, Joe. Shake hands on that as a bargain. I am, in this matter, hoping to prove your wife's innocence, but I

shall take up any evidence that comes along, and apply it where it belongs."

"I want you to, old fellow, no matter what the pain it brings."

"To begin with, you know all my hopes are to the end that Lillian may prove to be as innocent as a babe."

"Heaven grant it," Joe groaned.

His tone betokened despair.

The detective judged from this that his friend must have made some discovery since last they met.

"At the same time, Joe, you know as it looks at present, things are decidedly against your wife."

"I try to deceive myself, Eric, into the belief that it is not so, but I cannot, I cannot. She shall have a fair trial—I will give her the advantage of every doubt, and then—"

He could not finish the sentence.

Poor fellow! how Eric pitied him, and in that moment, believing Lillian guilty, cursed the hour she ever crossed Joe's path, to blight a life devoted to her.

Never mind—the end was not yet.

"Tell me what you have discovered, Eric,"

said Leslie, throwing off the terrible feeling that almost overcame him.

"After you, my boy."

"How do you know I have anything to tell?" in a surprised tone.

"Your looks give it away. Proceed."

So, being encouraged to speak, Joe gave a brief account of the charming scene that had taken place in his home on the preceding night.

Eric was quite interested, and his reflections upon the little woman were flattering to her.

Then came the climax.

The note with the charred edge was produced, and submitted to examination.

Eric looked upon it as furnishing quite a link in the chain of evidence—he believed the secret referred to must indeed mean that which they were looking up.

When Joe heard the opinion of his friend, he was not much encouraged—indeed, his spirits were reduced to a lower ebb; but he shut his teeth and said nothing.

"Now I want your opinion, Joe, as a man of some legal acumen. It is a little question I desire to have settled," he said.

With that he took out the document he had received from Lillian.

"You recognize the handwriting?"

"I do—it is my wife's," with a shiver.

"I had another paper, but gave it up to the owner; but, as it fortunately turned out, ere doing so I traced the signature with a piece of tracing paper—see, here it is."

He put the two together.

"Bend over, Joe."

"What do you want me to decide?" nervously, as might a man who feared lest his words might convict one he loved.

"Examine these signatures."

"I am doing so."

"If asked your opinion frankly as an outsider, would you incline to the belief that one hand had made both of these?"

"You insist on a reply?"

"I think you had better give it."

"Then, according to my humble opinion, those letters are alike, and the chances are decidedly in favor of the same party having made both."

"My opinion exactly—I would not swear to it but I put the chances in that way."

Then he turned the paper over to Joe.

"What of this?" asked that worthy.

"There is nothing out of the way in it. I only

had your wife write it out and sign her initials in order to compare it with the other document."

"Tell me about the other."

"I will reproduce it, word for word."

Drawing some paper to him he wrote rapidly for a few minutes.

Then he placed the duplicate of Frescott's letter in front of Joe.

"This looks like a deep conspiracy, Eric—you say this was signed that way?"

"Yes."

"Was it—in—her handwriting?"

"There were enough points of resemblance to make it striking."

"Heavens!" and he beat his fist against his forehead in despair—then recovered his calmness after an effort.

"You say you have lost this document?"

"I had compared them in the elevated coming down here, and was still looking at that one when a hand was laid on my arm and a man asked me what I was doing with his property. I saw he was the owner and gave it over—we had a few words and separated."

"Was that man known to me?"

"By sight, yes."

Joe shuddered visibly, as though he understood the suggestive words of the other.

"Then it was *he*?"

"Paul Prescott, the artist."

"Curses on him for a meddler! Lillian has a weakness for art, and I have often jokingly told her she should have married a painter."

"That explains his power in a measure—he has fed her on art and won her regard by posing as a hero."

Joe struck the duplicate paper fiercely.

"Eric, you may think me crazy to doubt it, but unless Lillian declares in my presence that this is the product of her pen I will never believe it."

"Joe, my friend, I honor you for such a feeling, and I hope as I never hoped before in my life that this thing will prove a false alarm. All the same I shall do my duty by you every time, as a true friend."

"A thousand thanks. I feel fifty years old to-day instead of thirty-six—it is my birthday, you know, Eric," with a sad smile.

"I wish you many happy returns, my dear fellow—just three years younger than I am. I wish I had a gift to give you."

"The best gift this world could give me would

be the proof that my wife is the true and faithful wife I have always believed her. Great heavens! Eric, when I think of it all, a spasm comes over me—my fingers twitch as though they would love to encircle the throat of that arch-devil and choke his life out.”

Eric was surprised.

He had not believed this of Joe, looking upon the other as a sort of good-natured giant whom any one could impose upon. Now he saw him angry he made up his mind that if ever Paul Prescott and Joe came in contact it would go hard with the artist.

“Well, I declare, you will make a modern Othello yet, Joe.”

“No, no,” with a shudder, “I might kill him, but I would never raise a finger against her if she deceived me time and again. I couldn’t; I must love her always.”

Eric shrugged his shoulders.

“Every man to his taste. Your character is one in a thousand, Joe. As for me I confess I have more of the tiger about me, and if a man or woman foully wrongs me I look forward with pleasure to revenge.”

“Don’t let us talk about it—the worst I would

do to her would be to seek a separation—but for him,” and his face grew grandly dark and gloomy, but he did not finish.

“I wish to ask you a few questions about your home, Joe.”

“Do so.”

“In the first place you have a girl.”

“Yes, two of them.”

“What positions do they occupy?”

“One is in the kitchen—the other a sort of upstairs girl, to take care of the rooms, answer the door, and wait upon the table.”

“Describe the cook.”

Joe laughed.

“She is as fat as she is long, almost, and as good-natured as she is fat.”

Eric made a gesture.

“That point is settled. Now the other.”

“Nanny is a woman too, but much smaller, and ladylike in her ways. She came here from Chicago with us.”

“Ah! a favorite of your wife’s?”

“Yes. Nanny was in her mother’s employ as a girl. She is faithful to us.”

“Ahem! Just the person, in fact, to be entrusted with a message of a secret nature, that must be handed to a certain party?”

At this Joe turned red and white by turns.

"I presume so," he admitted, uneasily.

"Is Nanny about my height, rather slim, and quick in her actions?"

"Yes."

"Dresses in black?"

"My soul! man, you seem to drive the nails into my coffin with each question."

"Answer, Joe."

"She does dress in black—most maids do in New York now."

"Wear a white apron?"

"No," with a gleam of hope.

"Neither did this girl. I knew she was a maid by the courtesy she made when handing Prescott the letter, and also from the little white cap she wore."

Poor Joe's last chance seemed gone—the other had knocked away the pins upon which his house was built.

"That was probably Nanny, but I can not and will not believe Lillian wrote that note. Some other party had hired Nanny to give it to that man."

Darrell knew Joe was hugging a phantom to his heart, but he could not take pleasure in ar-

going with the deceived husband—besides, Joe's actions proved that he believed more than he would admit either to himself or his confidential adviser, and if the blow did come it would not be such a terrible shock as if he had received no warning.

The end was not far away.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LOCKED SARATOGA

The detective was not yet through.

He wished to find out a few other things connected with the case, through information which Joe alone could give.

When the latter had told his story concerning what had happened at his house on the preceding night, he had touched lightly on the incident of the closet.

The keen detective had however made a mental note of the circumstance, and he was bound to know more of the matter.

"What sort of a closet is it?" he asked.

"Quite a roomy affair."

"You keep what there?"

"A number of odds and ends, and I believe a large Saratoga trunk."

"Ah! your wife's?"

"She brought it from Chicago. On our little

trips to Boston and Washington we used my leather one."

"Then this trunk has been there all the while?"

"Yes."

"Think now—have you ever known Lillian to enter that closet for anything since she came to you?"

Joe turned white.

"She might have done so dozens of times."

"But have you known her to?"

"I have not."

"Is there anything kept there she would want?"

"Not that I know of."

"Under the circumstances does it not strike you as singular that she should not only enter the closet but lock it and take the key upstairs?"

"Eric, I have thought so myself," sadly.

"Now, Joe, you are withholding something from me that has a bearing on this matter."

"How do you know it?" quickly.

"Well, perhaps a little bird told me, or else I read the secret in your face. At any rate you have no business to keep it from me, I am trying to do my duty—heaven knows if I could I would have your wife as spotless as the noon-day sky, and if she proves otherwise I shall lose

faith in all womankind forever; but I must be able to weigh every particle of evidence for and against her."

"I beg your pardon, Eric, but I felt so badly over the circumstance that I hardly had the heart to relate it to you."

"Then it is against her?"

"I am afraid so."

"The sky grows very black—poor Joe—poor Lillian—my heart is in sympathy with you."

Joe had buried his face in his hands and seemed quite overcome.

The detective waited.

When his friend had in a measure recovered from the shock, he spoke.

"Now tell me the circumstances."

Joe's voice was a little unsteady, but it gained strength as he proceeded:

"When I came down this morning it was late for me, but I had not slept well, and felt a raging headache.

"Lillian was in the library, and left me to go down to see if she could not have a cup of strong tea made, which always acts as a sedative with me when I have a headache.

"My thoughts had never gone from that closet

and I had already seen that the key was in the door for Lillian had brought it down.

"Hardly had she left the room than I was over there and had the door open.

"I examined the interior but found it all as I had been in the habit of seeing it.

"This surprised me. Could I after all have done her an injustice with my suspicions?

"I was beginning to think so, when I suddenly noticed a little thing.

"The key of her Saratoga trunk was missing.

"I remembered seeing it in the trunk a few weeks before.

"Why should Lillian take it?

"Instinctively I tried the lid—it was fast—the trunk was locked.

"I left the closet, and was sitting in the library when the breakfast bell rang, and Lillian came in to go down with me.

"She was full of spirits, while I felt as though I were about to attend my own funeral.

"During the progress of the meal I spoke about there being a chance of our soon going out to Chicago to pay a visit, and she seemed to be very quiet over it, unusually so, I believed.

"By the way, I miss the key of your trunk—

will you let me see if the interior is in good condition?' I said as steadily as I could, although I felt my face turn red.

"She looked at me as though surprised.

"To-morrow you can do so, Joe—to-day you are in poor condition for anything. Take your mind off everything that excites it. I wish you would stay at home to-day and nurse your headache.'

"I professed to have business of unusual importance down town, and shortly after left the house for my office.

"Now, Eric, give me your honest opinion—my mind is hardly in a fit condition to see and judge for myself."

The detective had listened intently.

He could grasp the threads and draw them into one compact cord.

The issue was before him.

"Joe, it is beyond all question that her secret lies in that trunk—if we knew what it contains, nothing more would be needed."

"Yes, I suppose so," rather wearily.

"From the tenor of the letter Prescott received I am inclined to believe some one is about to run away with him, or he with her, rather."

Joe groaned dismally.

"If in that trunk I should find some of her dresses and jewelry—well, I should be strongly inclined to believe it meant flight."

"No, no," hoarsely, clutching his throbbing brow with both hands, "not that. Lillian would never be guilty of that. She may have flirted with the man—women are weak, I know—but that is the worst I will believe of her—the worst."

Darrell shrugged his shoulders.

"Very good, Joe, but you must permit me to place my own estimation on things. My eyes are not blinded by love—I can weigh things calmly, and place their right estimation upon them."

"Eric, I said I would leave it all with you and I do, but until it is proven beyond all doubt, do not ask me to believe in her guilt. It will kill me if it is so."

"Trust in me, Joe, old fellow, I will act for you as though you were my brother."

"And—whatever comes, Eric—be gentle with Lillian—let me be the one to—oh! my God! I cannot believe it, and yet it seems as though a burning iron were branding it on my brain."

The detective was done for the present.

From Joe's offices he went to his own.

Here he could sit down and review the situation in regular order.

Darrell generally made notes of his subject, so that he might ever keep the circumstances before his mind.

He now jotted down a few more headings, and then surveyed the case as seen through these spectacles which he had drawn on.

Looking over his shoulder we can also get a resume of the case by reading what he filled up a page in his note book with.

They were arranged under heads in numerical order, beginning at the start:

1—Paul Prescott, an artist, makes daily visits to Joe's house when Joe is down town.

2—Lillian Leslie has a secret from her husband.

3—The paper dropped by Prescott is in her writing, and seems to promise an elopement. It is also signed L, her initial.

4—The girl who gave Prescott the letter corresponds with Lillian's faithful maid, who has been in the family for many years.

5—The fact of her having the closet key upstairs is significant in itself.

6—Her trunk is locked and the key gone—

she says she will produce it when Joe has leisure to examine the trunk—there is no hurry—the morrow will do—evidently *something* is to occur between now and to-morrow.

This was the indictment.

Against it, on the opposite page, he had written the defense—it came under one head:

“1— Lillian is my ideal of womanly perfection—if she prove guilty my faith is gone forever. I have never yet been able to *believe* her guilty while in her presence—it is only when away that these terrible facts make me fear it is so.”

A peculiar case this. If Lillian could plead her own cause, she would undoubtedly win it.

For a long time Eric Darrell sat and looked at his notes.

They covered about all of the case.

He could not but see how overwhelming the evidence was against Lillian and how meager her defense.

Still he kept hoping for the best, trusting that something would turn up to send the balance over to the other side. Had it been any one other than Lillian, the detective must have declared that there could be no hope—the case

would be virtually closed. With such a client, however, he had hope to the end, because all his sympathies were enlisted in behalf of Joe and his wife.

He was not the man to waste time in useless speculation, and when he had calmly reviewed the situation, he made up his mind what ought to be done.

Would it be possible to save Lillian even though she were guilty?

He could not face her—his first thought had been to see her and speak of the terrible nature of the indictment hanging over her like the sword of Damocles, suspended by a single hair—perhaps she was influenced by some strange power the artist possessed—mesmerized, made a slave by some peculiar phase in a powerful organization—Eric had known of such things, although he did not pretend to understand them.

When he came to think it over, however, he concluded that he could not muster up courage enough to say these things to her face.

He was certain that, strong-nerved man as he was, he would utterly fail when he sat opposite those eyes, and felt them upon him.

Was there any other source to which he might apply?

He ran over the field.

What of Paul Prescott?

The thought seemed absurd at first but presently he began to realize that there was a chance back of it.

The man was a character and might not be as bad as appearances indicated.

Perhaps moral suasion might influence him, and in case that failed a threat would possibly have the desired effect.

The more he thought over the matter the better he looked upon the idea.

At last he determined to try it.

There could be no harm done.

At the same time he had a chance to accomplish a great work.

A new thought had entered Eric's head.

Even if Lillian was guilty he might through some work, skillfully arranged, so manage it that the disturbing element should be removed, and their lives flow on smoothly again.

This was his highest hope.

That he would find Lillian innocent had ceased to enter into his calculations.

He only hoped for a half way victory. It was noon when he went out, and stopping in a res-

taurant he had dinner. His plan was arranged.

If he could effect a meeting with the artist, the worst would soon be known, and he would also discover what sort of man Prescott was.

He knew where the latter had his studio, and presently was bound for Fourteenth Street to interview the artist. What would come of that interview no one could tell, but Eric hoped for a favorable issue.

At any rate he did not think his case would be destroyed by what he was now about to undertake.

At half past one he entered the building where Paul Prescott had his studio.

A few minutes later he stood at the door and gave a loud knock.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ARTIST IS DEFIANT

"Come in!" said a voice.

Eric opened the door.

An odor of tobacco greeted him.

Prescott, in his studio dress, was before a painting, putting some touches here and there.

So interested was he that he did not turn his head when the door closed.

Darrell looked at the painting and was charmed—it was a glimpse of the Delaware Water Gap, and so true to nature that one could almost believe he was on the spot.

Finally the artist stepped back a pace.

"There! that is done. I beg your pardon—" and he wheeled around.

As he saw who his visitor was he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Ah! you, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Darrell."

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Mr. Darrell?"

Evidently he was inclined to be a little suspicious of the man who had had that letter in his possession.

At the same time his curiosity was aroused.

Eric saw this. He was ready to take advantage of it.

Coolly seating himself he said:

"Mr. Prescott, I have called to see you in reference to that paper which you received from my hands this morning."

"Ah! indeed," with a frown.

Not at all dismayed the detective went on:

"I believe you claimed it as your property?"

"I did—have you any reason to doubt my word?"

"Not at all, sir. If it was your property, then the letter must have been addressed to you."

"It was."

"Mr. Prescott, you are looked upon in society as an honorable man—your name has never yet been tarnished. As a friend I beg of you to pause ere you cross the Rubicon."

"What's all this about? It seems to me you are interesting yourself in a business that does not concern you in the least," coldly.

"That is where you are mistaken, sir—it does interest me greatly."

"In what way?"

"I know the lady who wrote that note."

The artist shrugged his shoulders.

"Well?"

Eric was somewhat surprised.

He had expected that the man would show signs of consternation.

On the contrary he maintained his self-possession, and even smiled.

"You contemplate a step that is bound to bring trouble."

"It is not my fault," with a sneer; "some people are so wrapped up in themselves that they can see no one else. This lady—her name shall not be mentioned, as I would not have it the subject of a quarrel—prefers my company to that in which circumstances have thrown her. She is restrained of her liberty, and I would give it to her. That is all. Through the interference of some interloper, such as yourself, we may be prevented from carrying our immediate plans into execution, but the postponement can only be temporary. We must triumph!"

Eric was more than ever amazed.

This man did not appear shamefaced—he even gloried in his foul work.

Surely this was the acme of villainy.

How was he to meet it?

Could he cow the artist?

Already he had made up his mind that this was impossible, for the man seemed to be as daring as he was bad.

What then?

There was nothing left but to let the game take its course.

If Joe and this man ever came into personal contact there would be trouble, for the artist looked like a man who would back up his acts with blows.

“You refuse to change your plans, then?”

“Most decidedly.”

“Well, you may rue it ere long.”

“See here, what makes it your business—there was no name attached to this note—how do you know who wrote it—what in the devil have you got to do with it, anyhow, and what is to hinder me from giving you a sound thrashing on account of your confounded impudence in the affair?”

His manner was threatening.

Eric did not wince.

"Mr. Prescott, listen to me, I am a man not acquainted with fear, nor do I descend to fisticuffs. You see I am armed—now you can keep your distance and talk reason or else take the consequences."

At sight of the revolver the artist started.

He seemed to suspect for the first time what manner of man he was dealing with.

"Are you a—detective?"

"I am, sir!"

"In *his* employ?"

"Mr.—the gentleman referred to is an old friend of mine. I have sworn to see him through this trouble."

"Were you following me when this paper fell?"

"Yes."

"You saw it drop?"

"I did."

"And the maid who gave it—perhaps you followed her home."

"No matter—I believe I know all there is to be known of this affair, sir. I am here to advise you to drop it before you get hurt."

"Would you like to hear my opinion of you, sir?"

"It would in no wise alter the one I hold of you, Mr. Prescott. Still it is not my plan to indulge in personalities. Remember that what I do is done as a business and from friendship. I wrong no honest man and deceive no trusting woman."

"You make me out a scamp, which I am not, in my own estimation," he said hotly.

"That is another subject which we need not discuss, sir, since our ideas would be sure to be at variance. You go your way and I go mine; but at the last I wish to distinctly warn you that we are prepared to give you your deserts if you persist in your course."

"You can go to the man who employs you and tell him for me that Paul Prescott defies him, and will fight him to the end!"

This was strange language—there was certainly nothing cringing here.

"Very good. Your blood be on your own head. You are watched when you least expect it."

"Be careful you don't go too far and get hurt."

"Bah! I was in that opium den last night and saw the tragedy."

Prescott started at this, and looked uneasy.

"You there?"

"I was the man who took charge of the remains of that unfortunate lady."

"Is it possible—I never suspected I had seen you previous to our meeting in the car. What did you accomplish?"

"The thing I desired. The world will never know that lady died anywhere but in her own house."

"Then you have done a good thing, sir."

"We detectives are employed to do deeds of mercy as well as those of justice and duty. I bid you good day, Mr. Prescott."

He had nothing more to say.

The man was not one to argue with, and having made up his mind all the powers of heaven and earth could not change it.

This Eric read on his face, and saw in his manner—Prescott was as stubborn as a mule in all he undertook, which perhaps in a measure accounted for his success.

The detective was disappointed.

He had hoped for much and gained nothing, since the other was so set in his ways as to be defiant.

As Darrell had said there was nothing left now but to let matters run their course.

The puzzle had become deeper than ever to him, and he now accepted it without any very strong attempt at solving the enigma.

He could not understand how Lillian could love such a man as Prescott in preference to her husband, except on the theory that the artist possessed some terrible power over her which she was incapable of resisting.

Sadly he left the building.

The game must go on now to the inevitable conclusion—some one would get hurt, but that was to be expected.

What he regretted most of all was the shock to poor Joe.

Strange how such an honest, good fellow, making a husband beyond all reproach, should be thus afflicted.

It often happens in life. Then men who deserve little are given wives a thousand times too good for them.

All are not mated who are married, any more with regard to their character than in their stature—we often see a little man and a tall woman going along arm in arm and smile as we think how incongruous it seems, never reflecting that their natures may be more in harmony than the well-mated pair ahead.

The detective believed that the guilty couple had some plan matured, and that they meant to make their flight that night

Indications pointed to it.

He resolved then, to checkmate them, and make the thing a failure.

Under no condition should Lillian be allowed to go forth.

Eric endeavored to picture Joe's wife in her confusion, when the mask was torn off.

Would she prove a firebrand?

He did not believe it. It seemed utterly impossible for a sweet, mild-mannered little woman like Lillian to develop into a fury.

No doubt, when she found that her secret was known, she would collapse in a heap at the feet of her husband, and he—well, Eric believed Joe was fool enough to take her in his arms and forgive her.

How could he learn what their plans were?

He was thus pondering when he saw a figure in front of him that he thought he recognized. It was the trim maid who had given Prescott the note before.

Of course Eric might be mistaken—there were many other like maids besides Mrs. Leslie's

particular, but having the subject in his mind he jumped to the conclusion that this must be the same party he had seen before.

She was walking along slowly, looking up at the numbers of the great buildings as if searching for a particular one.

Undoubtedly she was looking for the building in which the artist had his studio.

Quick as a flash a plan came into the detective's mind.

What should she be looking for Prescott for but to deliver a note?

He intercepted her.

When he saw her face he discovered that she was an exceedingly youthful looking person to be about thirty years of age, as Joe had declared—had he been asked to guess it he would have said seventeen.

Appearances are deceitful, however, especially when women are concerned.

As he came face to face with the girl, he smiled—she did not look offended.

"I beg your pardon, but are you looking for the office of Paul Prescott?"

She seemed surprised.

"How did you know, sir?"

"Because I am a friend of his with authority to receive the note you have and keep it for him. I presume it is from the same party as the one you gave him last evening."

"You know about that, too?"

"Of course—I saw it. Give me the note and tell the lady Paul has it, as he will in half an hour."

"But—I—"

"The note, girl."

She met his eyes, placed a note in his hand and turning sped away, while the detective chuckled to think what a cunning little god Fortune was after all.

CHAPTER XVIII

FORTUNE'S FAVORS

At least luck favored him and Eric could not say anything against the sudden whirl of the wheel that had left him in such an advantageous position.

He was naturally anxious to scan the note he held and learn its contents.

Looking around he saw a candy and ice cream saloon near by, where many ladies and few gentlemen passed in.

He believed, as the fall day was warm, that he could enjoy a plate of cream, so he entered, selecting a table in a corner that was isolated.

Here he gave his order, and while enjoying his cream opened the note.

It was sealed in the envelope, but the gum had stuck poorly, and he could easily open it with his knife blade.

Once the contents lay open before him he read:

"To-night then it shall be. We are to have

company at our house. I cannot get my trunk out without arousing his suspicions so I have sent everything to the place you named in packages by my maid. Have the carriage around the corner. I will slip out while the gayety is at its height, meet you at the door and in a minute we will be beyond his reach. He has been cruel to me, I fear him, and yet I love you, Paul, and will be yours forever."

This time no signature.

The writer was learning caution.

Even initials might be dangerous.

As for Eric, he read this note over again with the deepest pain and surprise.

"She means to leave him—there is no doubt of that, but what can she have reference to when she speaks of his cruelty? Joe cruel—Joe, the kindest, mildest, dearest fellow, I ever knew. He could only be cruel by kindness. Either he has done too much for her, or else she is not in her right mind. If that man is cruel then Prescott is a devil, I'm sure. I would that the writer of this could find out the truth—it would serve her well if we let her go on and reap as she has sown but for the sake of my poor friend she must be saved."

He took out an old envelope and with a pencil copied the note verbatim.

Then he enclosed the original in the envelope, sealed it up, saw that the address was correct, and was ready to have it delivered.

When he issued forth from the confectionary, he looked about him until he saw a bright appearing district messenger boy sauntering along in the manner peculiar to his kind.

This youth he beckoned to his side.

"Can you spare five minutes, boy?"

The other grinned and nodded.

"Make it up later, mister."

"All right. Here is a note, it is to be taken to the top floor of this number and delivered into the hands of Mr. Prescott, the artist. You can take the elevator up."

"All right, boss."

"You are to tell him a girl dressed in black and wearing a little maid's cap on her head gave you the note."

"Fine lookin' maid you are, mister."

"Never mind—do as I say. Here's fifteen cents. If you come and report to me the result, I have a quarter more for you."

"Hey! I'm off like the limited express."

So saying he took note and money and plunged into the building with hot haste, determined to win the prize offered.

Eric waited patiently.

He knew he would see the boy again.

That silver quarter would serve as a magnet to draw him back to the spot.

Eric had not studied human nature thus long without being able to guess certain things, and in this instance his surmise proved correct.

Before the ten minutes had elapsed he saw the messenger boy come flying along in a way that must have amazed any person who had grown accustomed to the usual methods of these lads.

"Here you are, sir. Right side up with care. Found him in, and delivered the note."

The grin on the boy's face declared also that he had been paid for his work by the artist, but this was none of Eric's business.

He took out a quarter.

"See here now, boy, I want you to prove what you say. What did you do?"

"Knocked on the door—a cove opened it—asked him if Paul Prescott was in—said as how he was the same—handed him the letter—he

opened it, grinned, and gave me a shiner. Then I vamosed the ranch and came to you."

"Did he ask you where you got it?"

"I told him the girl in black racket, which was really the worst I ever heard, but the fellow seemed to swallow it without question."

"Describe the gentleman."

This was the crucial test.

The boy obeyed without hesitation, and speedily proved that he must have seen and conversed with the artist himself.

After that Eric had no good reason for longer withholding the promised reward, which was quickly stowed away in the lad's pocket.

The artist's interview had not resulted in all that he expected, but he could not say it had been barren of profit. Then again what followed had made up in a measure for his defeat.

He knew the enemy's plans.

Thus it would not be such a tremendous job to defeat them. Should Joe know?

He believed it would be policy to put him on his guard, and in that way the plotting of the enemy would prove less profitable. So it was to end to-night.

A carriage was to be in waiting at the corner,

and while Joe's attention was taken up with entertaining his guests, his wife would slip out and meet her lover.

Here was a chance for a little diplomacy.

For instance, perhaps it could be arranged that the real Prescott be kidnapped or otherwise kept out of the way, while Joe dressed himself up to resemble the other.

Then he could carry off his own wife, and at the proper time reveal his identity, and teach her a terrible lesson.

That would all be decidedly picturesque and highly dramatic, but there were a number of obstacles to it that would have to be overcome ere they could accomplish the best result.

These difficulties were of such a nature that it seemed as though they could not be overcome.

Darrell cast around him to see whether there was not some other means handy.

How would it do to have the artist arrested on some charge when on the way to the place of meeting?

He decided against this on the spot, for it was very apt to make the whole affair public gossip for the newspapers, something Joe would rather cut off his right hand than have occur.

Next in order he thought that Lillian might be given something to make her sleepy or have such a headache that she could never carry out her part of the arrangement; but this was offensive to his official taste—he felt as though it was retreating before the attack, and it was not his intention to do this.

Finally he decided to see Joe—perhaps the other would suggest something that might open up a plausible scheme—some little hint dropped in conversation would give Eric the clew he was looking for.

Joe was still in his office.

He looked surprised to see his friend, and yet made no remark.

In spite of his effort to appear cheerful, the keen eye of the detective could see the traces of acute suffering in his face.

“I’ve been to see that man, Joe,” he said.

“You have?”

“Yes, I thought it might be best for all concerned if I could shame him into giving up his design.”

“That was too bad, Eric, I would have forbidden it had I known your intention.”

“I know it. The thought came to me after I had seen you. I am sorry now I went.”

"You failed?"

"I did indeed."

"Well, don't be afraid to tell me. You see I'm calm and collected."

Eric could not but notice this, but he did not like it.

In his mind it seemed like the awful stillness that precedes the hurricane.

He had no excuse for withholding anything so he told Joe what had occurred. "That man is an accomplished scoundrel," the other said, quietly.

"I believe that myself, but don't be afraid of our not mastering him. I discovered one of his weak points after leaving him."

"Trust you for that—what was it?"

Eric proceeded to tell of his adventure.

"Show me the duplicate," said Joe, trembling with emotion.

When he had hastily read the copy Darrell had made, he uttered a low cry of despair.

"Yes, it is so," he muttered.

"What?"

"We are to have company to-night. It is my birthday, as I told you, and my wife said she had invited a few relatives and friends in to

spend the evening—an informal affair with a little supper of coffee, cakes and ice cream. Yes, it is all a deep-laid scheme—and on my birthday too. Oh! Lillian, my wife, how could you!”

His arms lay upon the table, and he let his head fall heavily upon them.

Eric turned to the window and smoked his cigar in silence.

He had the deepest respect for the grief of his friend—it was the keenest misery a human soul can meet here below—death causes many pangs, but not the bitter blank that comes when one is betrayed by the individual he or she had been ready to die for.

Yes, from the hour the base Judas betrayed his loving Master, human misery has never known a lower depth than this.

For five minutes Joe fought his battle all alone, and then he looked up.

His face was set and calm, as though he had conquered again.

It was a bitter struggle and wearing upon him but he must go through to the end.

“Eric, I am ready to converse again. Pardon my weakness, old friend, but this is a cruel business. I did not think I was such a baby.

"Baby! Great heavens! man, you bear it twice as well as I could. Such a thing would have murdered me outright."

They began talking again.

Eric spoke of his unformed plans, and between them they began to patch up a scheme by means of which the end they sought would be attained without publicity.

What it was we shall not disclose just now, leaving that for the proper time.

At any rate it seemed to give poor Joe some satisfaction to think he was able to circumvent the villain who had destroyed his peace of mind.

"After all, it might be better for me to challenge that man, and kill him," he said moodily.

"Yes, or leave Lillian a widow, at the mercy of any adventurer. Besides, in that way the whole dreadful story would get into the papers, and you could not live in New York even if that artist failed to murder you. No, you will find that the plan we have arranged is the best after all."

"You are undoubtedly right, Eric—consider it settled, and prepare to carry it out. We will end this agony this night and that devil shall learn what he risks in attempting to steal another man's treasure."

"You will not fail me, Joe?"

"It shall be the effort of my life, Darrell, to succeed. Have no fears of me—my pride has been aroused. It is not the weak lover but the outraged husband who speaks now."

CHAPTER XIX

THE TIME DRAWS NEAR

For once Joe Leslie was thoroughly aroused, and the detective knew he need have no fears of him again.

Whatever he was given to do he would carry out to the letter.

So they noted with something of satisfaction that the day was drawing to a close, and the night coming on, for their hour could not be reached until darkness had for some time settled down over the great city.

Both were anxious to have the thing over.

It did not give them much pleasure, and all their satisfaction arose in the thought that justice and right would triumph when the man who had plotted against the peace of a home went down among his idols of clay.

In these modern days men have to do strange things when the sanctity of their house has been invaded by a human serpent.

Sometimes the stern arm of the law is called upon for assistance.

Now and then, however, we read of some outraged husband going back to old time principles and being a law unto himself on such an occasion.

Long ago they had a means of avenging such wrongs by meeting in the lists with lance or sword—in short, fighting a duel.

The modern way is perhaps the best if least chivalric since it is all in favor of the man who has been wronged, and does not risk his life.

We have seen that Joe was not modern in his ways.

The last thing he desired on earth was to make his misery public.

His love for his wife was wonderful—he only blamed the man who had gained such power over her mind as to make her irresponsible. Just as though there were wizards to-day—the times of Salem witchcraft have not returned to haunt us again, thank heaven.

Joe really did believe—and the shrewd detective allowed the same idea to permeate his own mind to a certain extent—that it was a case where a weak mind was dominated by a masterful one

He had known such cases, and seen examples of hypnotism that had astonished him.

Thus he excused Lillian.

While Eric did not go that far, he believed there were extenuating circumstances connected with the case, and was willing to look upon it all in a most lenient way.

Probably he would have acted in a different manner had it been his own wife who was concerned in the affair.

That was a matter that brought the business down to mere speculation, and when it reached this point it became unprofitable.

When the detective left his friend he had everything arranged.

As far as human sight could see beyond, all was ready for the business in hand.

Should Paul Prescott attempt to put his little game into practice he would find himself brought up rather suddenly.

There was an hour or so of daylight left, and this Eric put to good advantage, as he had a number of little things to do.

One cannot engage to carry out a scheme like this without many accessories being needed, and the wise man looks for these before the time arrives for their use.

Gradually the day gave way to evening.

Darrell believed all was arranged.

He felt satisfied that before another day came around, Joe's condition would be changed—this night was the crisis—either his spirits must go down or else rise suddenly.

All depended on one person.

This was Lillian.

To him she was the one object that could affect his future—the lodestone that drew him on.

When he had made his preparations and eaten a light supper down town, Eric started for the scene of the coming comedy.

He could not pierce the future any more than any other human, and hence knew not whether it would remain such or prove to be a tragedy.

Coming events may often cast their shadows before, but there are times when the sun is so nearly in the zenith that this shadow does not amount to very much.

Besides, what does a shadow amount to anyhow—it is not tangible, and presents no opportunity for solution.

For once at least in his life the detective confessed himself unable to insure the future.

He knew certain facts, and that others would coalesce, but what the result would be he did not pretend to be chemist enough to decide.

Time alone would tell.

That was the physician who could be depended upon to bind up broken hearts, to solve the deepest mysteries and set everything right.

Given time, nothing was impossible.

As the shades of evening descended, Darrell brought up in the neighborhood of the building on Fourteenth Street where the artist's studio was located.

He was passing slowly by when a hack drove up and stopped at the curb.

"Engaged?" he asked the driver.

"Sorry, sir, but I am," returned that worthy.

A jehu always hates to lose a fare.

"Can't accommodate me up town?"

"Right away?"

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"About Eighty-fourth and Third Avenue."

The man's face lighted up—Darrell was answered—he saw a chance of doubling his fare.

"I reckon the other'd make no objection. Pay me first, and I'll tell him I was taken by you."

"How much?"

"One, fifty."

Without a murmur the detective handed over the amount, submitting to be robbed in order to carry out his point.

Of course he was disguised.

No one would for a moment imagine that this old gentleman was the same athletic individual who had visited Prescott in his studio, and argued with him over a revolver.

The clocks were striking seven as he entered the hack and made himself comfortable.

Along the wide pavement hundreds were still hurrying, although the swarms from all the great stores had long since passed by.

Presently from out the building the artist came. He looked worried, and well he might.

When a man sets out to steal another man's wife he risks a great deal.

It must weigh upon his mind, even the personal danger involved, though his conscience be free.

Darrell recognized this fact, and did not wonder at the look of anxiety he saw upon the countenance of the artist.

The latter looked up and down the street ere

catching sight of the hack at the curb. Then a smile came upon his face.

He walked up to the driver, spoke a few words, frowned when the other mentioned having another passenger, saw no other vehicle in sight that he could engage, glanced in at the seeming old man, and then, grumbling, entered.

"I trust I have not inconvenienced you, sir," remarked the old gentleman, anxiously.

"Not at all, not at all," replied the artist courteously, though his manner had belied his words.

They rumbled along.

Block after block was left behind.

It is a long distance from Fourteenth Street up to the point where they were bound, and when half an hour had gone by they had not yet reached their destination.

Indeed, it was not far from eight o'clock when the driver pulled up at the corner.

The old gentleman got out slowly.

He bade his traveling companion good night and turning walked away, his cane beating a lively tattoo upon the stone pavement.

Darrell was satisfied with his investment thus far—he had been carried up town, had seen the

artist well upon his way, and knew both driver and vehicle by sight.

There could not very well be any mistake after this—he believed things were well laid out, and that all they needed was a chance to execute their plan.

He again changed his looks, so that in case the artist saw him he would not realize that he had met him before.

With the facilities at his command it was not a difficult thing for him to do this, and by means of a few deft turns he completely altered his character, and might defy recognition, even were keener eyes concerned than those of Paul Prescott, the artist.

When this had been done Darrell walked up the avenue, and soon came to the corner where, as he expected, he found the vehicle

Prescott was not in sight.

Some two hours must elapse before the time arranged would pass.

The driver had also vanished, no doubt being in a liquor store near by, where he could wet his whistle, lounge at his ease and watch his team at the same time.

His horses would have a good chance to rest

before they were needed again, and this was probably one reason why the artist had him on hand at such an early hour.

When young Lochinvar carried off his bride he managed to have a good steed, knowing that everything depended on the swiftness of his flight, as pursuit would be sudden and furious.

So Paul Prescott, with an eye to possible emergencies, had chosen a vehicle that was drawn by a good team of animals.

He showed his wisdom here.

In case of pursuit it might be his salvation.

When the detective sauntered past the house upon which his interest was centered he saw that it was lighted up.

Company was expected.

Lillian had invited a few particular friends in to see them, on account of its being Joe's birthday.

As yet they had not begun to arrive, but would soon appear upon the scene.

Darrell heard a vehicle coming, and stopped in a dark spot near by.

"The first of the guests," he muttered.

As the carriage stopped in front of the house he gave a start.

"Jupiter! guests with trunks—that's odd."

There was a trunk up beside the driver, who at once leaped to the ground.

As he opened the door a vision of jaunty wraps and bonnets sprang out and flew up the steps to ring the bell, while Darrell held his breath as he guessed the truth.

The door opened.

"Marian!"

A flutter of feminine apparel, a little shriek of girlish delight, and the sisters were locked in each others' arms, to the wonderment of the man who watched below.

Then the jehu carried in the trunk, the door closed, the carriage rumbled away and the street resumed its wonted appearance.

Eric was puzzled.

He had not counted on this.

Had any of the others?

What effect would it have on the anticipated elopement, he wondered.

Here was the lover with his vehicle on hand, and such a nature as Paul Prescott's would not brook interference.

The affair became more complicated.

Darrell would have given something to have had the next two hours over.

As it was he had to possess his soul in patience and wait.

Things that he did not dream of were fated to turn up in that time, and he was bound to have his hands full.

Guests soon began to arrive. Several came in carriages, while others were not far enough away to bother with vehicles.

It was no fashionable gathering, but one of warm friends, of whom Joe Leslie had many.

His business and social life was such that he drew people to him, making many friends and few enemies, which is after all the only true way to go through this world.

CHAPTER XX

FOR PLUNDER

At about a quarter to nine Darrell once more sauntered past the house.

He could see into the parlor, as the inside shutters were turned, and with a number of others he was attracted by the bright scene.

Although perhaps he would not confess it, the bachelor detective was eagerly hoping for even a fleeting glimpse of Marian.

He got it too.

After having seen the photograph Lillian had shown him, he knew he could not be mistaken.

The girl stood for half a minute in direct focus from his place of observation, and the gas-light fell full upon her face and figure.

Darrell drew in a long breath.

"That settles it," he muttered, "I'll try—unless this other affair takes the heart out of me."

He had lived between thirty-five and forty years without ever having a serious love scrape; but

an inward monitor told him his time had come at last.

The little god plays all manner of pranks with his victims, and although Eric Darrell had eluded his sway so long, it would all be made up to him presently.

As Marian stood there she was joined by a second figure.

This was Joe.

Eric scanned his face eagerly, as best he could under the circumstances.

"Thank heaven! Joe is calm. He has aroused his energies. No danger of his giving out when the crucial test comes," he muttered.

Joe Leslie did appear self-possessed, but it was easy to be seen that he was not himself this evening.

His wife accounted for it to the friends about her by stating that Joe had been overworking himself lately, and that morning he complained of a severe headache.

She did not seem to suspect that she had given him cause for his breakdown.

None are so blind as those who refuse to see.

It might be this or innocence that caused her to ignore the truth.

Eric, with a sigh, passed on.

He had seen Lillian join the others, and the trio gave him a strange feeling.

"So fair, and yet so false. How can a man trust a woman when he has such a terrible example before his eyes—and her sister too."

He soon forgot all this. Something else attracted his attention, and he found that there was need of his care. A couple of sinister-looking men passed the house and looked in.

He saw them conversing eagerly together a minute or two later just beyond.

At first an idea sprang into his head that they might be men hired by Prescott to create a disturbance and delay pursuit after the latter had succeeded in reaching his carriage with Lillian.

If this were so, he must take them into his calculations and watch them closely. That their conversation concerned the house where the little gathering was taking place was beyond all doubt, for their motions attested this.

Then they moved off.

Eric did not believe they had gone, and he followed them with his eyes.

They slipped into a vacant lot near by, and the detective began to get a new idea.

Perhaps these fellows were not in the employ of the artist after all, but skirmishing around on their own hook.

That meant knavery.

He was aroused.

To follow them was his first thought.

Stealing down to the vacant lot he too vanished amid its blackness.

At first he could see and hear nothing, but in a few minutes he caught a clew, and found that the two men had gone to the fence separating the vacant lot from Joe's back yard.

Some old wagons and drays were scattered here and there about the place, for it presented an admirable wagon yard.

Such is cosmopolitan New York.

The palace often touches the hovel.

Some of the aristocrats up town can look out from their magnificent houses, and survey the shanty of the squatter built on the rocks, where the agile goat browses on old shoes and empty cans.

Some day this will not be, but it is so now, and a source of wonder to foreigners.

Darrell began to pick his way through the wagon yard, careful to proceed without noise,

for when men are bent upon an unlawful errand it does not take much of a sound to cause palpitation of the heart, and he did not want to have their death on his hands—just yet.

They seemed to be surveying the scene from the rear.

It was undoubtedly their intention to make some sort of a haul here.

The silver might be lying around loose, or even some jewelry in the upper rooms—men of their trade do not discriminate, so long as what they seize upon has a specific value.

First, last and all the time, what they want is the cold cash.

It was certain that they must be frightened away, and that at once.

His other business was too important to allow him the pleasure of playing with these fellows, much as he might have enjoyed it.

Under these circumstances he worked his way close to where they crouched.

He could hear them working with a chisel or burglar's tool of some sort—they were prying off a board from the fence, so that they might easily pass through when they desired.

It would be a good route for flight, also, after their object was attained.

So interested were they in the task that they did not have the faintest suspicion of the presence of any one.

Darrell could hear their low words

"Bill, this here promises to be a lucky strike," said one, in a low tone.

Bill muttered a reply.

"Well, I'm of the opinion, Bill, as we'll have a good whack at some valuables. Ye see, the guests are all in there—if we can deceive the gal below and slip upstairs there ought to be fat pickings for fellers of our size."

"Softly, partner, softly—there's another in this here game you ain't counted on."

As these words reached their ears, the two men muttered exclamations of dismay.

"Who the deuce is it?"

"Where in thunder is he?"

"I'm right here. You fellows are treading on my corns. This is my pasture—get out."

"Not much we won't. We'll slit your wizen first, I reckon. We're in this here game now for keeps," growled the man named Bill.

"Then you must go snacks. I'll furnish the information, and you do the work—an equalization of labor—ain't that fair?"

"What d'ye know, critter?"

"Where the silver is kept—it ain't been brought out yet awhile, and by a little bold work the hull of it can be spirited away."

At this the two men can hardly restrain their delight.

"Lead us to it, and the third is yourn."

"You're on the steal, then?"

"Ready to take anything that counts."

"This is the steel I deal in."

One of the men, the fellow nearest him, felt something like a piece of ice pressed against his left temple.

He put up his hand.

The investigation did not afford him any particular pleasure, for what he touched sent a shiver through his whole frame.

It was a cold revolver.

"Move a hand or a foot and you are a dead man. And you also," to the other fellow.

The board had just come off in this latter chap's arms, and light from the house poured through the opening in a stream that was strong enough to show him the situation.

He dared not drop the board, and he was also prevented from attacking the unknown.

Eric was master of the situation.

"Now see here, men, listen to me."

"Go ahead!" growled one.

"In mercy's name don't press that trigger," groaned the other.

Darrell had to smile at the sudden termination to which circumstances had brought the bold raid of the two sneak thieves.

They had come after plunder, but found something more awaiting them.

The little scheme, concocted on the spur of the moment, had been driven into obscurity.

"I am a detective, watching this house."

Both men groaned.

"Fools we was."

"And although I'm going to let you go this time, if I see either of you here again you'll make a bee-line for the Tombs."

"Don't worry, mister—if we get off this time we'll make ourselves scarce. It gives me a chill to think of Sing Sing."

"You ought to get the chill before you start on such an expedition, and not after you are caught. You know that when 'the devil was sick, the devil a monk would be; but when the devil got well, the devil a monk was he'."

"Kin we go, mister?"

"Yes—pass out the front door, gentlemen, just as you came in. And, remember, once goes a long way with me—if you show up here again, down you go to Centre Street."

"Thank ye, boss."

The men crept quickly away—indeed, their haste was really ludicrous, for they seemed to have a deep-rooted fear lest he might be tempted to change his mind.

But under the circumstances Eric was quite satisfied to see them safely off the premises.

His other work would take up his attention, and he could not expect to amuse himself with such side-shows as these.

He once more made his way to the street.

As before a little knot of curious people stood in front of the house gazing in. The glimpses they caught of beautiful women and brave men were a revelation to them. It was like looking into Paradise. Otherwise the street was quiet.

A train boomed past on the elevated road below. Eric looked at his watch. It was a quarter past nine.

Three-quarters of an hour still remained, and then would come the grand climax.

He began to breathe easier, for time was passing, and he felt sure their plans would come out all right.

Sauntering to the corner he saw the hack still there as he had left it.

The driver was sitting inside now.

He knew his orders and only waited for the proper time to arrive.

Where was Prescott?

Eric had expected to see him scouting around the Leslie mansion, but if the artist was there he had kept his person well concealed. Not yet had Eric doubted the motives that brought the other here.

Everything seemed to fit as snugly as though it had been made for it—when a carpenter makes a neat job he dove-tails the corners, and Darrell looked upon the many little things that connected so wonderfully, as the finishing touches of the joiner.

If a thunder cloud burst upon him it would certainly take him unawares, while the cool rain might be very acceptable.

He began to count the minutes.

Seldom had this man ever felt any such thing as nervousness in his life, but just now he cer-

tainly experienced a spell of it. The minutes seemed hours.

People walked along the street—he scrutinized every one as though he expected to see a ghost appear.

In reality he was looking for Prescott.

It worried him to know that the man was somewhere around and yet out of sight, though he did not doubt but what he would be on hand when needed.

CHAPTER XXI

THE COTTAGE BEYOND THE HARLEM

Sometimes things do not run quite as smoothly as we hope for.

The best laid plans of mice and men often go wrong—there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.

So it happened on the present occasion.

It was all owing to a certain clock which had taken a notion to get ahead of its fellows and was some ten minutes fast.

A lamp set Chicago on fire.

So this unlucky clock upset the beautiful plans of the wily detective, as he believed, and came near leaving him in the lurch.

By chance he was down near the corner when suddenly he saw a female hurrying that way.

A long cloak concealed her figure, but a handsome dress of white silk peeped below—a heavy veil had been snatched up to hide her face and serve in lieu of a hat at the same time.

Where she came from he hardly knew, but a terrible fear almost palsied him.

It was Lillian!

She had come ahead of time—Joe would not be ready, and as a result confusion must ensue.

Luckily the detective was a man able to grasp an emergency.

He never yet had seen the time when he was so taken by surprise that his mind refused to do its work.

Just then there was need of quick thought, and action must follow on its heels.

Hardly had the woman paused upon the corner than a dark figure sprang out of the shadows near by.

"Paul!" she whispered.

"Good heavens! you are ten minutes ahead of time, darling. I would have met you at the place appointed had—" the rush of a train drowned what else he said.

Then the detective saw him assist the now shrinking figure toward the carriage.

"He will be furious," he heard her say, as she looked apprehensively around, as though anticipating the appearance of an enraged husband on the scene.

If these were her sensations now, what of the future—remorse must soon kill her.

"He had better keep his hands off, or I will teach him a lesson! The cowardly cur, to bully you so. Enter, darling—you are safe with me."

Eric's first impulse was for blood.

He felt strongly inclined to spring forward and grapple with this boaster, who breathed such lies of Joe in his wife's ears.

Then another thought came.

Such a public scene would immediately collect a crowd at the corner, and Lillian's name would be dragged in the dust.

The world has no mercy upon a woman who leaves her husband and runs away with another man—the latter loses no caste, but she, poor creature, can never climb up again.

That is the law of human justice—woman was given a nobler, purer nature than man, and when she sins it is unpardonable.

It has been so ever since the world was, and will be the same always.

While Eric struggled between what he desired to do and what policy dictated, the choice was taken from him altogether.

Fate decided.

Prescott had placed his charge in the hack and entered himself.

The driver slammed the door, and mounted nimbly to his box.

If Eric mean to act it must be now, or the chance was gone forever.

Already the vehicle was moving.

Now or never!

Obedying a sudden impulse to make the most of a bad bargain, he ran after the hack.

It had not gained much headway as yet, and Eric caught on behind.

Here he conceived another one of those sudden fancies, and saw an opportunity to climb up on top of the vehicle.

Fortunately for his purpose it presented good opportunities for such gymnastic feats.

No one but a boy or an exceedingly agile man could have accomplished this thing; but the detective certainly filled the bill so far as the latter condition was concerned.

He pulled himself up—his feet secured a hold upon the springs, and his hands grasped a clutch above.

Then he drew himself upon the top.

A few boys along the pavement noticed this

but they only supposed this was some peculiar way in which a man could gain a seat beside the driver.

Those inside were too busily engaged in exchanging confidences to notice anything.

As for the jehu, he was so much taken up with his horses, avoiding obstructions for which Third Avenue is notorious, that he never dreamed of the odd passenger he had picked up, until Eric plumped down on the box beside him.

"Great Scott! where did you drop from?" he ejaculated in dismay, looking up as if he really suspected the unknown had rained down.

"Don't worry yourself—I only climbed up over the back," returned Eric coolly.

"Then just you climb down again in a hurry, or I'll toss you over," and the man, firing up after his sudden scare, looked ugly enough to carry his threat into execution.

"Some other time, old fellow—just now this place suits me as well as any, and here I stay."

The rattle of the swiftly moving vehicle over the granite blocks would prevent any one from hearing this interesting dialogue—the parties interested were shouting in each other's ears.

Perhaps there was something about Eric that

aroused a spirit of animosity in the other; but if so there must also have been that which warned him to be exceedingly careful.

He showed signs of anger, and yet dared not raise his hand in open rebellion

"What d'ye mean stealing a ride this way?"

"Just because I please. Look down here and you'll see something."

The quarrelsome jehu obeyed.

He looked—and wilted.

"Jupiter!"

This man was not the first who ever felt his courage ooze from his finger ends at sight of a revolver.

"Understand me," said the detective, sternly, "that is for you if you give me any trouble."

"A crazy man escaping—a burglar at large!"

"No, sir, a detective running down his game. We understand each other, I hope. I want a ride on your vehicle, and if you give me any trouble I'll land you in the Tombs double quick as accessory to a murder."

The word was quite enough.

It blanched the man's cheeks and from that time on the detective knew he would not have any trouble with him.

The horses were doing their prettiest.

To the surprise of the detective, instead of starting down Third Avenue, the course was up it.

Evidently then the artist did not mean to go either to his studio or lodgings.

He had other plans in view.

Now Eric was given a chance to think, and he improved it well.

So suddenly had this crisis been sprung upon the detective that he had thus far only acted from impulse.

He must shape some sort of plan, in order to yet win the game.

Those inside the hack had not the slightest suspicion of his presence.

The rattle of the vehicle and their own agitation would prevent their paying any attention to anything happening outside.

As the night air was cool, all the openings had the glass in them—this was another point in the detective's favor.

No doubt Paul Prescott was thrilled with the great victory he had won, and believed nothing could keep him from accomplishing the end toward which he had planned so long, little suspecting the danger hovering near.

On went the vehicle.

Harlem was gained, that new city that has of late years sprung up beside the river, a part of New York, and yet really distinct from it.

Darrell had once more become the cool man as of yore, ready to grapple with this burning question, and throttle the hydra headed monster that had crossed the track of Joe Leslie's wife.

He smiled to think what poor Joe must be doing just then—finding Lillian really gone and the detective not on hand. Had he given the whole thing away? Would all his guests know that his wife had deserted him for another?

This was a possibility that made Eric grit his teeth and feel angry at the peculiar chance that had cheated him of his prey. If things had only worked as they should, the wheels would have gone along nicely. However, Eric had learned long ago the folly of crying over spilt milk, and when a disaster occurred he generally set about retrieving his fortunes as well as possible.

They were nearing the Harlem.

Would the vehicle cross the bridge and proceed up into the country beyond?

Pursuit—it was folly to think of any one being able to pursue them, at least for some time

to come, and a trail grows cold with waiting.

No wonder then the artist felt jolly.

He believed his plan had been a complete success, and that the prize was his own.

Ah! the Harlem at last.

Those curved lines of lights indicated the bridge that stretched across.

The horses' feet fall upon the planking—their course then was over the river.

As for Eric, he was quite indifferent now whither they took him.

He had made up his mind to see this thing through and to save Lillian for his friend and it did not matter whether the climax came to pass in the city or country.

He meant it should be severe.

As Joe Leslie's best friend he would teach this masher a lesson he would never forget if he survived it. The driver once or twice tried to strike up a conversation with him, but Eric ordered him to pay no attention to anything but his horses. Then a thought coming to him, he told the man that if the gentleman inside should notice his presence and demand to know who he was, that the driver should claim him as a friend and let it pass.

This the man said he would do—he had a horror of being concerned in a murder trial, and this was what the other threatened him with.

They crossed the bridge and continued on—houses were plenty, gas lamps dispelled the darkness at intervals, but at the same time there seemed to be something of the country about them—the great metropolis with its two millions of inhabitants, its bustle and electric lights lay behind them.

For a short time longer the night ride was continued, and then, to the satisfaction of the detective, it ended.

They came to a quiet street.

The artist poked his head out of the window which he had dropped in the door.

“To the left—first house you come to.”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Hello, there! who the deuce have you with you, driver?” as he caught sight of Eric.

“A friend, sir. Thought it'd be a lonely ride back, and took him for company,” replied jehu.

“All right, I suppose.”

That was over then, and no damage done.

Now for the next

The hack drew up in front of a picturesque

cottage, just back from the road—as far as Eric could see it was bowered in vines and just the place an artist might be supposed to select, if he used his artistic taste at all.

Lights were in the rooms,

They must be expected.

Down jumped the driver—Eric followed close upon his heels, for he did not mean to give the fellow any chance to betray him, and he knew it would be human nature for the jehu to endeavor to warn his liberal patron.

CHAPTER XXII

ALMOST

Again the detective showed his knowledge of the animal—man.

The driver had been thinking of this very thing, and as the artist came out of the hack first he made a great ado over helping him. At the same time he started to say:

"You'd better be careful, sir—there's—"

At this moment came a pinch on his arm from the detective, and he realized that the other was up to his little game.

"What's that?" demanded Prescott.

By this time Eric had managed to touch one of the jehu's hands with the barrel of his revolver.

The contact sent a shudder through the other.

"There's bad step here—the lady might be hurt," finished the driver.

"Oh! I'll look after her, my man."

He handed the jehu some bills. "There's the

amount agreed on and ten dollars more, because you've been faithful."

"Thanks, your honor," stammered the man.

He acted as though he was tempted to blurt out the truth and take the consequences, but Eric managed to whisper something to him that quieted this suicidal thought.

"You've got your money—keep quiet, and I'll put you in the way of ten more."

That was enough.

The man's sordid nature was touched—he was mercenary to an unusual degree.

After that he was for earning the new fee, even at the expense of treachery to his former patron. Prescott assisted the lady companion of his flight out with much solicitude.

Still Eric did not interfere.

He was strongly tempted to knock the artist down, seize the lady perhaps as she swooned, and placing her back in the vehicle, drive to the desecrated home of his friend.

Something restrained him.

He would see more.

What meant the lights in the house?

Something here needed investigation, and he was the man to look into it.

He saw the couple enter the yard and proceed in the direction of the front door.

It opened.

A woman's form stood there.

"Welcome, Mr. Prescott. We heard the wheels and were sure it was you. Welcome to your home, Mrs. —"

The rest died out as they went in, and the detective heard no more.

He was amazed. How daring the artist was. How openly he carried out his plans.

Most men would have taken a train and sped away like the wind, fearing the terrible vengeance of an outraged husband.

He did not seem to realize the danger he incurred, or else had a contempt for it.

Eric was in doubt whether this man was a fool or a brave fellow.

Perhaps he was cunning enough to know that in all probability the husband would seek for him at a distance, and overlook the near places. This would be wisdom.

Eric now turned to the man.

"See here, my fine fellow, I have your number, and if you play me false I'll land you behind the bars inside of twelve hours if it takes

every officer on the force to do it. You hear what I am saying. Serve me well and what I promised is yours. I have already paid you money to-night."

"You?"

"Certainly—I was the old man who rode up from Fourteenth Street with you."

"Jerusalem!"

The driver saw that he had to deal with a shrewd man—he admired such a person, and could well afford to fall in behind him.

After that there would be no kick on his part against what fate had decided for him, but he would pull in the traces meekly.

Satisfied that the man would be there when he wanted him, Eric now turned his attention toward the house.

He entered the gate.

As he had supposed from the glance he had obtained, the place was an ideal one for the full expression of love in a cottage.

Flowers probably bloomed here from May until bleak November.

Honeysuckles and wisteria covered the cottage—rose bushes and dozens of varieties of flowers filled the beds, but just then beautiful

chrysanthemums were taking their rank as the fall flower.

It was a place to bring a bride, but would these beauties of nature appeal to a heart that was heavy with sin?

Eric could not for the life of him see how one could look upon nature again, after ruining the life of a noble man, but his experience had taught him to be surprised at nothing.

He did not speculate now.

Before him was duty.

It lay in a direct line, and the path was narrow, but he meant to tread it.

That duty covered his professional pride, and the feeling he entertained for his friend. Straight up to the house he went. Light streamed from the windows and showed him the way—it also tempted him to look in. He saw a cozy little room neatly furnished.

Handsome paintings adorned the walls, rather out of place in a modest cottage like this, but then it was to be the abode of an artist, whose pictures commanded large sums, and he could afford to decorate above the ordinary—these were doubtless favorite subjects of his which he **did not hold for sale.**

No one seemed to be in this room, and he could not see in the other well, for the lamp was standing directly in the window, so that he could not look past it.

He found a path leading around the house and started along it.

Before he had gone far, the rattle of a chain, followed by a deep growl, told him he had better retrace his steps again—not wishing to come into contact with the concealed dog, he did so.

This time he went to the front door, which was almost concealed under the bower of vines.

Feeling around he found the knob. Upon trying it he was pleased to find that the door was not secured, and answered to his touch.

He opened it boldly. A hall was before him. Just then it was unoccupied, and the uninvited guest was able to step in, close the door, and look around for some place of concealment. This he easily found.

The hall offered numerous opportunities for hiding if one felt inclined that way, and Eric speedily ensconced himself in a place where he was not apt to be seen. He remained here awaiting developments for a few minutes.

Nobody seemed to be moving. He heard

voices in the room where the lamp in the window had prevented him from seeing what the room contained.

One of these was the voice of Prescott.

The other seemed to belong to a man also, and Eric wondered at this.

He had not supposed the artist would have a friend awaiting him here—generally when a man runs off with another's wife he desires to shun society of all sort. There was reason enough for this, which made the action of the transgressor the more peculiar.

He wondered whether there was not something about this whole affair that he did not understand.

Later, he found out that this was so—that a man may see all the surface indications and yet not get at the real facts in the case.

He waited in his concealment for a while, and then made up his mind to push matters.

Why should he not appear before Paul Prescott and boldly announce his intention of wresting from his power the victim of his spell?

There was nothing to prevent him.

He made his way toward the door that led from the hall into the room, which as he afterward discovered was the library.

A *portiere* hung there in place of the door, and a more excellent opportunity for hiding and spying could not well have been offered.

Behind this he could find a small opening and thus see without being seen.

When he looked into the room he found there were but two men there.

One of these was Prescott—the other a small man of severe countenance.

The first thought of the detective was that the latter had a clerical look—his clothes seemed on the order of a clergyman, white tie and all.

Then he concluded that he must be mistaken. Surely, a minister would be the last one in all the world whom Prescott would desire to have here.

This must be some friend whom he had asked to greet them at the cottage in order to encourage Lillian.

The men were laughing.

Prescott seemed in unusual spirits.

Perhaps he had been imbibing—when a man in his sober senses commits such a sin against society and his Maker he must, generally, fortify himself with some ardent spirits.

At any rate he had the appearance of a man who was quite satisfied with himself.

The world had abused him, in some respects, but to-night he was in a humor to bid the whole universe defiance.

Success had come to him—the best he had ever dreamed of was now at his hand.

Others before Paul Prescott had believed themselves on the pinnacle of hope and power, only to find it all a dream and an illusion.

So Darrell reflected as he watched the man whom he meant to speedily humble.

While the two were yet talking, a door in the back part of the library opened.

Through this came three females. The first one was very like Prescott—indeed, it was easy for the detective to determine that she must be the artist's sister.

After her came a sedate woman, neatly dressed, with her hair parted and brushed straight back on either side—a model of a housekeeper.

There was one more.

At sight of her Eric started, and an exclamation bubbled to his lips.

She was dressed in white silk—the long cloak had been discarded, and the heavy black veil that had screened her was now supplanted by a gauzy white one, through which the faintest

glimpses only could be seen of her face. She was a picture indeed.

Eric held his breath.

He saw Prescott rush forward and take her hand with the utmost eagerness. Then the other led her forward. They stood in front of the second man, who held a book in his hand.

"Good heavens!" muttered the detective.

He rubbed his eyes.

What mockery was this? A marriage—when she was already another man's wife! He could hardly believe his sight.

The voice of the preacher aroused him, and started him into life.

This must not be. It was sacrilege.

Knowing the facts of the case he would be abetting a crime if he allowed this thing to go on without raising an objection.

So, while the minister was still talking, Eric suddenly sprang into the room.

"I forbid this marriage!" he cried.

A scene of confusion followed.

The women fell back—Prescott swore and the minister looked amazed.

An interruption like this seldom occurs.

"Upon what charge do you dare stop this sacred ceremony?" demanded the preacher.

"The woman has been married before."

"Yes."

"Her husband is living!"

At this there came a shriek from the bride.

"It is false, false as Hades! I helped to bury her husband myself," shouted the artist.

Eric, with a quick movement, threw back the white veil from the face of the almost fainting bride and then he received the greatest shock of his life.

It was not ^{his} Lillian!

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MESSENGER WITH GOOD NEWS

Eric Darrell might have been frozen—he seemed so petrified with surprise.

Instead of Lillian's sweet face, marked by horror, he saw that of the dashing widow, Mrs. Collingwood, she with whom Prescott had communicated in the opium joint.

It dawned upon the detective.

All along there had been a great mistake—many things remained to be explained away, but the one main point was assured—Lillian must be innocent of the charge.

He was a man of extraordinary sense, as well as a man of action.

Recovering himself, he turned gracefully to Paul Prescott, who was glaring at him.

"Mr. Prescott, there has been a grave mistake here on my part. I thought this lady was some one else. I beg your pardon. Let the ceremony proceed. I withdraw my objection. When it is over we will have a mutual understanding."

These words restored everyone to good humor. The artist dropped his frown, the dominie found his place in the book, and the bride again stood up beside the man she was taking for better or worse and the ceremony went on.

Now was a chance for Eric to do some tall thinking, and he did so.

He saw many things in a new light, and had about arranged all he wanted to say when the marriage service was over.

"I pronounce you man and wife," said the minister, and, bending over, the artist kissed his bride.

Then the three females retired again, the preacher hurried away, and Eric found himself alone with the man whom he had had under surveillance for so long a time.

The artist eyed him.

"Who are you, sir?"

"I am a detective, Mr. Prescott—I have been in your presence before."

"By Jove! you are the man who bearded me in my studio."

"Yes, and the man who rode up in the hack with you to Eighty-fifth Street."

"That old gent with the cane?"

"Also the friend of your driver who came up here with you."

"And you are hired by Colonel Rogers—but if so, why the deuce did you stop the ceremony and then allow it to go on?"

The artist was amazed.

Well he might be.

The detective knew he had good reason for surprise, and was in a measure ready to gratify that curiosity.

In return he hoped the artist would reveal certain strange things to him.

So Eric told all that was necessary—he did not even mention the lady's name.

Prescott smiled—he thought he could guess who it referred to.

"If you go to that house from here, my friend, you will learn something," he said, quietly.

"But what does all this singular action of yours mean, sir? You must admit everything seemed to prove you guilty, even to the lady's initial, L."

"Her name is Laura. As I said before, I was at the burial of her first husband. The story is a long one and I can only give you an outline of it—I might not do that only that I feel in

such a jolly humor on this, my wedding night.

“Jerry Collingwood and I were rivals—he won Laura by a trick, and she found it out after her marriage, despising him for it. Then came his tragic death, perhaps you remember it.

“After that, Laura went to live with her uncle, Colonel Rogers—she found him a stern man, and he was soon plotting against her.

“She was strangely influenced by him—he had a power over her, which he magnified in her mind, and she obeyed him unquestioningly until by accident we met again.

“I need not tell you all we passed through—Rogers wished her to marry his son, and we finally realized that he would give us trouble unless we took the bull by the horns.

“So we arranged this elopement—how well it has been carried out I leave to you to decide.

“Laura is now my wife—any man who dares to whisper a word against her good name, were he a dozen times a colonel, shall answer to me for it at the muzzle of the revolver. We have outwitted the wily Rogers, and he will have to give an account of his stewardship.”

“That is all?”

“Yes.”

"It is enough. Prescott, even when I had reason to believe you guilty of the most heinous sin on the calendar—that of stealing the affection of an honest man's wife—there were points about you I admired. Since learning what your true work was, I can say without flattery that I am sincerely glad to know you—glad that you have accomplished what you set out to perform, and trust that your future as a Benedict may be free from clouds."

"Thank you, sir. I have waited a long time for Laura, but she is mine at last. Won't you stay and break a bottle of champagne?"

"Thanks, but I must be off. I have another engagement I must fill."

"I can imagine where."

"Yes," dryly, "and probably this will be as happy a night to another man as it is to you—he has found a wife as well as yourself."

"And the lady you refer to is the sweetest and best little woman in the world—save one"—hastily correcting himself—"the man must be a fool who could doubt her constancy."

"You don't know all, Prescott. Her husband is the truest, noblest man I know. He rejected it all again and again, but he is human and he

saw and heard things that would convince a skeptic."

"Probably he understands all by this time, and he will eat humble pie too."

"I hope so. Good night, Mr. Prescott. Bring the doughty colonel to his knees."

"I'll wring his nose if he gives me any further trouble, the old nuisance."

"Success to you."

Eric Darrell left the vine-embowered cottage with feelings greatly differing from his entrance.

He was light of heart.

Not only was this on account of Joe and his wife, but his faith in womankind had been saved.

Had Lillian been guilty Eric was determined never again to believe in a woman.

This would have made him a cynic and a scoffer all of his days—now he could remember with a delicious thrill that Marian was at Joe's house, and he would soon meet the original of the picture that had charmed him so.

He did not remember of having felt so good for a long time back.

That was the result of the reaction.

As yet he could form no distinct idea of the true state of affairs—all was chaotic confusion,

but above everything he saw the prime fact that Lillian was innocent.

That covered all.

How Joe must rejoice.

It would be a new lease of life to him.

So the detective walked out to the street, and found the hack waiting.

The driver greeted him.

"Glad to see you on deck—it was a mistake after all. Now drive me to the corner you brought me from and the fee is yours."

"Good."

Away they rattled.

The detective felt inclined to smoke, and was soon puffing a cigar out of the window, as he did not want to saturate his clothes with the strong odor, fearing lest Marian might be one with her sister in objecting to tobacco.

Then he wondered what time it was.

They had started at ten minutes to ten and made wonderful time, so that it could not be very late, he thought.

Taking out his watch as they crossed the bridge over the Harlem, he found that it was fifteen minutes after eleven.

Would he be in time?

He did not know how long these informal affairs were apt to last, but at a rough guess figured that they would still be on hand at midnight and he ought to be there before that.

He urged the driver on.

Finally the vehicle drew up. They had arrived. When Eric found that it lacked fifteen minutes of twelve, he was satisfied, handed the driver his fee, and hurried along the street.

He drew near the house.

Lights still shone in every window.

Something caused him to feel very queerly—he could not say what it was.

Did Joe know all?

Perhaps not—he might still be in a fog and wondering why all the plans had miscarried.

Eric did not hesitate.

He immediately ran up the steps.

Then he noticed that the parlor was deserted—the good people could not have gone, for he could hear the laughter and buzz of voices—ah! they were doubtless in the diningroom below.

He rang the bell.

A colored man answered it.

"I wish to see Mr. Leslie on important business. Take my card to him."

The man knew his business, closed the door and went away with the card.

One, two minutes passed.

Then Eric heard footsteps within.

The door opened.

There could be no mistaking that figure—it was Joe who stood there.

Eric's eyes sought his face instantly—he saw a look of mute pain there which told him better than words that Joe did not yet know the truth.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

At sight of his friend Joe held out his hand warmly

"Eric, old man, I have wondered where you have been. Everything has gone wrong. She is still here, and yet the hour is long past—that villain must have backed out."

"No, he carried out his plans to the letter; he had his carriage waiting, ran off with a lady at ten o'clock, at eleven was married to her in a cottage beyond the Harlem, and is now a Benedict as well as yourself, Joe—but it was not your wife he was after."

"Not my wife?" slowly, as though the wonderful news almost paralyzed his brain—"not Lillian he sought?"

"Joe, it was all a terrible, a cruel mistake which fortune put upon you."

"Good heavens! do you mean it?"

"Lillian, your sweet wife, is as innocent as **you** ever believed her in your most charitable

moods. That I will swear to—you will learn all before this night is over, and I believe the mystery of the locked trunk will be revealed. Just now I am famished for a bite to eat and a cup of the coffee I get a scent of. Suppose you invite me in—I am not in evening dress, but a few minutes in your room will arrange my toilet and make me presentable. I want to see this thing out—to rejoice with you, old boy, over the wife you thought you had lost but who is found again. Besides, you know, I want to meet Marian, and I know she is here.”

What could Joe do?

He dragged his friend upstairs and himself assisted to brush him into presentable shape.

Ten minutes were consumed thus, and then Eric was ready to go down.

All this while Joe had plied him with questions and the detective told a good deal of what had happened to him.

There were some things of which he would not speak, however, and hence Joe found himself in a state bordering on bewilderment when he finally went downstairs.

By this time the guests had finished supper and were again flocking into the parlors.

There were between twenty-five and thirty in all.

Eric was introduced all around.

He noticed that there was some little secret among a number of those present—Lillian, all blushes and confusion, was being consulted by an old gentleman with a white beard.

Although Eric had declared he was almost famished he would not leave the rooms now for supper—something was on the *tapis*, and he was bound to see it out.

Supper could wait.

Ah! it came at last.

The elderly gentleman rapped on a table. Silence ensued.

All eyes were bent on him, all but those of Joe Leslie, and his blazing orbs rested on the blushing face of Lillian—before he learned all he wanted to prove that he no longer entertained the slightest suspicion regarding her.

“Friends, we have spent a very pleasant evening at the house of our neighbor—we all cherish Joe Leslie and his charming wife as among those whose names will never leave the tablets of our memory—a devoted couple, loving, kind and gentle, whom it is an honor to know.

"Before we part to-night, it is my pleasure to officiate at a little surprise—I am going to let our friend Leslie see himself as others see him—in brief, I shall introduce him to himself.

"My grandchild Barbara and Mrs. Leslie have always possessed an artistic temperament. They consulted with me about it, and I took some of their amateur work to a friend who is a well-known artist.

"The upshot of it all is that for a month past Barbara has been flitting over here at ten o'clock every morning through the gate we have in our back fence, and the two have been taking lessons in painting with astonishing success.

"This evening I was astonished to find a fine oil painting of myself, true to nature, on my drawing-room wall—I had not dreamed my grandchild was so gifted.

"And now for our fair Lillian's birthday gift to her husband—bring them forth, friends."

Out from the mysterious closet came two gold-framed paintings—they were placed on easels prepared for them, in front of the astonished Joe.

The faces were those of himself and his wife, astonishingly well done.

He hardly glanced at his own, but his eyes

were glued upon the counterfeit resemblance of his dear wife—done by her hand too.

Eric was amazed.

He looked from the painting to the original—the work was no amateurish daub, but worthy of a master.

Could it be possible she had painted it?

She was a genius.

At first delighted expressions arose, and then, as the old gentleman raised his hand, these died away again.

All eyes were turned upon Joe.

He stood there as if petrified—his eyes were glued upon the picture of his wife, and he hardly seemed to breathe.

Then he slowly turned his gaze upon the same face in flesh and blood.

She looked at him, still blushing—tears were in her sweet eyes—she smiled through them.

Joe forgot where he was—he only remembered that he had wronged that dear little woman by harboring thoughts that reflected on her love and purity of heart.

Another instant he was at her side, had clasped her hand, and falling on his knees before her, kissed the little member whose cunning had wrought such wonders upon the canvas.

The others believed it was mute adoration that took him to her feet—regard for genius—and they thought all the more of Joe Leslie because he could appreciate a gift as well as a good wife.

There was one present who knew what was in Joe's mind as he bent his head before his wife, unable to speak, though his lips moved as they formed the word "forgive."

To cover Joe's terrible confusion Eric made some remark appropriate to the occasion, and of a nature to create a laugh.

This answered the purpose and presently the good people were chatting gaily.

Joe soon found occasion to seek his friend Eric, and squeeze his hand until the detective winced under the pressure.

"Thank heaven, Eric, for this blessing. All is bright again. I have the dearest wife in all New York to-night. Tried and found true."

"And she has a deuced fine sister too," said Eric with a wink.

"That's the way the land lies, eh? Try it, old fellow. Nothing would suit me better; we would be brothers in truth then. And I declare, now that I come to think of it, I believe you two would make a fine match."

"Nonsense, Joe. When Miss Marian hears that I am a detective she will shrink from me. People honor judges who sentence people to death, sometimes innocently, and great lawyers, who are often on the side of criminals, but at the same time pretend to look down on the officers of the law whose sagacity leads them to arrest those who break the statutes of the state."

"I don't know about that—she adores a hero in any type."

"Come, don't you go to making me out as such—I'm only an every-day chap and never expect to do anything heroic."

"Save your worry. If I tell her anything at all it will only be the truth."

As it turned out, Miss Marion was rather capricious—she heard Joe tell long yarns of his friend's bravery, she respected him as a man, even while openly disliking his profession, but Eric soon saw she was giving him no sort of encouragement.

This was hard because he was already deeply in love with the girl.

He went his way, taking his disappointment as best he could—they met occasionally, but Eric did not pursue the game.

One night when Joe and the two ladies were on the way home in a street car, it was suddenly halted—there was a fire ahead.

Marian had never seen a large fire and Joe, good-natured always, readily agreed to take them where they could have a view.

The giant shouldered a way for them through the crowd, and soon they stood in a doorway watching the flames play riot with the tenement near by.

It was a terrible sight and a pitiful one to those who looked on—many poor families were driven out, carrying what they could lay hands on, one a trunk, another a feather bed, and a third some old gowns.

Fright made their faces wrinkled, and such looks the ladies had never seen before.

Suddenly a cry went up.

The flames were roaring, engines pumping and much noise sounding, but this shriek pierced the hearts of all—it was a mother's wail.

“My child! my child—save her!”

All eyes were fastened upon a window up in the third story where the face of a flaxen-haired little girl appeared—blanched with fear, and yet curious to see what was going on.

The ladder wagon had not arrived, and the flames were devouring the frail tenement.

Surely the child was lost—no one could save her there. It was an awful period of suspense to the thousands who looked on. Lillian and her sister held their breath and leaned on Joe for support.

Then the child vanished.

“Heavens! she has gone—the floor has probably fallen in,” gasped Joe. “No, no, look! there is a man at the window—he has seized the child and is tying her to himself. Look! he climbs out of the windows. Ugh! if he loses his grip both will be dashed to pieces.”

They gaze as if fascinated, both of the gentle ladies praying for the daring man's success.

He swings himself boldly along the ledge—none but a quick-witted man could have seen the chance that existed, but he had.

Reaching a certain spot he took hold of the pipe that ran down the building—it must have burned his hands, but he lowered himself by it to the floor below.

Flames were beneath, but he had arranged his plan—a tall telegraph pole slanted in here and a dexterous man could leap in among

its numerous arms—he coolly calculated his chances and sprang out.

There was a cry of horror.

“He is down—no, no, by Jove, he clings there with one hand. See how bravely he exerts himself—as cool as a cucumber through all. Now he seizes a new support; he will slide down the pole. Hurrah! both are safe, thank heaven.”

Then Joe turned to Marian.

“What do you think of that man?” he asked.

“He is a hero—I love him,” she said impulsively.

“Good! I shall let him know that fact some day. Here he comes now with the child on his shoulder, his face blackened, his hair scorched, but, thank God, the same Eric as of old.”

The man passed them by—it was Eric Darrell!

Marian turned white and then rosy red.

“Joe,” she said almost fiercely, “if you ever repeat my words, I’ll—go back to Chicago.”

Whether Joe repeated them or not no one ever knew, but Eric heard enough to encourage him to renew his suit, and when Marian did return to Chicago it was as Mrs. Darrell.

They are just as happy as Joe and Lillian—

Eric is no longer a detective, but has been studying for a doctor, as his wife believes he will make a name in the profession. She will never forget watching him save the widow's child at the risk of his life—outwardly she loves him as a true wife, but in secret she adores her Eric as a hero of heroes.

THE END

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